

BLUE PETE
PAYS A
DEBT

LUKE
ALLAN

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HERBERT
JENKINS



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BLUE PETE PAYS A DEBT

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

This exhilarating Western story describes how Blue Pete—"the most popular cowboy character in fiction"—bested Frenchy Thoreau, a cattle-thief and worse with oddly chivalrous ideas, but a killer as quick-witted as swift on the draw.

On the prairies and mountain trails of the Canadian—U.S. border, rife with rustlers' leads and treacherous bands of outlawed Indians, Blue Pete relentlessly stalked his dangerous quarry. At bay, Thoreau turned and struck with deadly precision, and Blue Pete, out-manoeuvred and out-gunned, was jammed in the tightest corner of his rip-roaring career.

"Mr. Allan has the technique of the Wild West at his finger tips," says *Truth*. No one can doubt that who follows this latest of Blue Pete's famous exploits.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

BLUE PETE: REBEL

THE VENGEANCE OF BLUE PETE

THE TENDERFOOT

See also pages 285, 286

BLUE PETE PAYS A DEBT

by

LUKE ALLAN

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*All the characters in this book are purely imaginary
and have no relation whatever to any living persons.*

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CHAPTER I

AID FOR A MOUNTIE

THE big, cross-eyed half breed on the scraggly-tailed pinto dozed as he rode. One long leg, in its dirty leather chaps flung carelessly across the high-horned saddle, hung dangling limply from one hand; shoulders bent and chin almost resting on his chest, he appeared to be sound asleep. The little pinto, her yellow and white blotches scattered unsymmetrically and of irregular size and shape, loped lazily along, automatic as a machine and apparently as indifferent to her surroundings as her master.

The sun was dropping toward the top of the western mountains, and the nip of a mid-September evening filled the air with a refreshing briskness. All about, as far as eye could see, the prairie was lifeless and still. A gentle breeze waved over the dead grass on the crests of the rolling heights. To the west the monotonous billows of lifeless yellow were broken at intervals by bluffs of trees and far beyond rose against the flaming sky the frozen peaks of climbing mountains, the Rockies. Almost a hundred miles distant, they stood out distinct in the limped air of the Canadian West.

Everywhere was nothing that moved except the grass and the solitary horse and rider. Somnolent, monotonous, cheerless, desolate—even the single spot

of life a dreary mechanical movement that seemed to blend perfectly with its surroundings.

Closer attention however would notice that neither rider nor bronco slept. The shiny black boot that hung so limply across the saddle twisted and turned, and the thinly-haired ragged tail of the pinto twitched nervously and with expressive impatience.

The eyes beneath the soled grey sombrero were fixed frontingly on that shiny boot for it was not the customary high heeled affair a cowboy her wears and that fact conveyed a definite message its owner envisioned travelling on foot. For the distinctive cowboy boot with its extreme heels is not built for walking, a cowboy will mount his bronco to cross the street.

Some fact of significance was conveyed too by that twitching tail though only the pinto and her rider understood it. Whiskers was fixing on almost equally urgent the customary time had arrived for rest.

That was not surprising nor was it to the discredit of the pinto, for she had maintained that pace for the greater part of four days. Until that day the routine had been the same day after day, two hours travel, followed by a twenty minute rest. But to-day the half breed had risen from his bed on the open prairie and had saddled up an hour earlier than usual. And now for more than three hours they had not so much as hesitated.

In the movements of the tail was even something more than indignation and weariness. Whiskers was worried. To forget their usual rest period meant that Blue Pete had forgotten her that he had something on his mind that closed it to the world in which the pinto and the half breed were one. Haste? There had been no particular evidence of the need of it during those earlier days of their trek from the ranch south of Medicine Hat. Fear? Even Whiskers, a mere little

bronco knew that Blue Pete didn't know the meaning of fear. Worry was the one explanation left. And when Blue Pete worried so did the pinto.

Minutes passed—more minutes. The scrawny tail twitched more impatiently. They poured over a height and dropped into the coulee beyond. And Whiskers, demanding an understanding, slowed down—stopped. Legs braced, she turned her head and eyed her rider accusingly.

The half-breed returned the stare. He chuckled.

"Got-swizzle, ole gal, yuh re plumb right," he muttered, reaching forward to pat the arched neck. "Yuh're right 'bout the lay-off. But yuh don' know wot I know mebbe. I ain't fergot yuh, not Blue Pete, he ain't. On y' you 'n' me's got intuh a corner o' the West whar it ain't none too healthy fer us. I wanta git intuh them foothills thar whar I kin hide us w'en it ain't wise to be seed.

"Surely yuh ain't fergot wot happened w'en we was here on'y a coupla weeks ago, hev yuh? An' yuh wasn' through it all then neither like I was. Now we're comin' back, like durn fools runnin' our heads in a noose mebbe. An' them Injuns ain' fergot nothin'. They never do—ef that's any good to yuh."

The pinto listened patiently. One could see that she understood. She waited, head raised, ears turned stiffly backward.

"Yessar, them Neches don't like me a bit . . . an' thar's a white man wot's got some Neche blood, an' he's shootin' on sight, jes' like I'm shootin' him same way."

He grinned a little sheepishly. "Yuh see, ole gal, I got sorta reckless an' keerless in them foothills las' time. Fact is, I got keerless 'fore I got to 'em. W'en a chap's sore ridin' the bumpers all night, an' ever'body tryin' to hound him off, w'en a Mountie tries it like-

wise an' that Mountie a cayuse is handy, all tugged up fer a ride - wal I jes' natchully run off with it. Can't blame the Mountie fer bein' sore likewise, kin yuh? An' the prairie s like to be lousy with Mounties w'en they ain't wanted.

'Mounties git sore 'bout lil things like that. 'Course I got the cayuse back whole an' all that - but that don't fix up nothin'. Yuh know how it is. Jes' like th' Inspector'd be. Yuh know one yuh know 'em all.' He shook his head wonderingly. And the Mounties down here they don't know nothin' 'bout me an' I ain't lowed to tell nothin' 'bout me workin' fer Inspector Barker. So you n' me s gotta git through to them foothills soon s we kin. I rather face the Neches 'n the Mounties. So git 'long a bit more, won't yuh, old gal?'

The pinto started away. And her tail twitched no more, because she understood. She was not really tired. She was accustomed to these long trips, her muscles were of steel, her wind unbreakable.

They followed no road - not so much as a trail. Simply they went west straight toward those patches of glacier looming against the sky. The prairie grass was soft to a bronco's hoofs, to be sure, but that did not explain their avoidance of travelled routes. Indeed they seldom followed a trail at any time. The years of their association had been passed under conditions where privacy was not only wise but necessary. A rustler avoids strangers, and the habit carries over with good reason to the other sphere. Blue Pete was filling as an unofficial Mounted Police detective. So that, even undirected, Whiskers shunned other companionship than her master.

On and on and on. Dying again, it seemed, both of them.

But a life of peril had keened every faculty to wakefulness even when they slept.

Suddenly the pinto pulled up, head lifted, eyes and ears turned to the north. A low, warning snort burst from her. But Blue Pete did not need the warning. He, too, had heard that distant rifle shot, and automatically his hand reached back to the rifle resting in its saddle holster behind his right leg.

For only a moment horse and rider stood at stiff attention, then the half-breed slid from the saddle and commenced to crawl to an elevation in the direction from which the shot had come. He carried the rifle. Lower and lower he sank as he climbed the slope, until at last he glided forward flat on his stomach. He seemed to melt into the dead grass.

Over the top he peered.

Out before him, almost half a mile away, a horse lay kicking, its rider prone beside it. A couple of hundred yards further away a man rode urgently to the north. His hand still grasped a rifle, and he threw a glance over his shoulder as he rode.

Blue Pete's rifle slid forward. Almost a thousand yards, but the target was large. The rifle sight flicked upward.

Then across the sight something moved. It was the rider who had been thrown by the fallen horse. Slowly he came to his knees, struggling against the drape into which the fall had knocked him. His hand went to his head, and he looked vaguely about.

The half-breed's rifle dropped slowly away. He uttered a sharp exclamation. "A Mountie!"

Scrambling to his feet, he rushed back to the pinto. She met him half way, and he vaulted into the saddle as she picked up speed. Over the height they raced, straight for the Mounted Policeman. He had come

to his feet and was bent beside his horse that had risen and now stood trembling beside him.

At the sound of the racing pinto the Policeman turned quickly, reaching for his gun. Blue Pete leaned from the saddle as he passed.

"Want 'im?" he asked, pointing at the retreating rider.

The Policeman pointed to a streak of blood across his horse's shoulder. "He did that," he jerked, teeth clenched.

"We'll git 'im fer yuh," Blue Pete shouted back.

The pinto lengthened her stride and seemed to flatten against the prairie.

The escaping man had momentarily vanished in a coulee. Blue Pete glanced back. The Policeman was mounting his horse. The half-breed waved, grinned, and went on.

He swept into a coulee. The fugitive had shifted his direction there and started westward. Whiskers set off in the same direction. Already the space between them had decreased. Blue Pete whispered a few encouraging words. The chase continued. The man ahead rode a powerful bronco, and for a time he almost held his own. But, though the pinto had come two hundred miles in three days and a half, she would never give up.

The fleeing man heard the pounding behind him, for he turned to look. For a moment or two he studied the pinto, as if appraising his chance of escape. Then, rising in the saddle, he twisted, the rifle came to his shoulder, and a bullet whistled near the half-breed.

Blue Pete heard it. "Durn good fer a flyin' shot back'ards," he applauded. He had his own rifle in his hand but he did not use it.

A second bullet whistled past.

"Yuh jes' don' know wot a close shave this is fer yuh, mister. Blue Pete growled. Yuh hit Whiskers an yuh re a goner. Wiah! I cud give yuh a lesson, but them dang Mounties allus spoil the fun. I cud blow yer head off. He raised his rifle. Anyways, here's one to make yuh stop an' thank stranger."

He appeared to pull the trigger almost without aiming. The result was startling. The stranger's rifle flew from his hand and he dare not stop to recover it.

The race continued. But Whiskers slowly cut down the intervening distance. Far away the Mounted Policeman came limping toward them.

Blue Pete thrust his rifle back in the holster. He would need it no longer. The man he pursued saw it, and his eyes flashed with hope and satisfaction. He had his two revolvers, and he knew how to use them—and would. He saw that the Policeman was dropping further and further behind. A few hundred yards more and he himself would stop and show his pursuer what shooting was. No one in his part of the country had been able to stand before his six shooter. If that held good in Wyoming he could not imagine that Canada could be dangerous.

Further and further back dropped the Mounted Police horse. Nearer and nearer crept the pinto. The half breed did not urge her. Whiskers knew what pace was best.

A hundred yards—eighty—fifty. The hand of the man ahead went to his belt and a gun appeared and waved threateningly backward.

Blue Pete only grinned and went on. At that distance a man on a racing horse would not be very dangerous. He did not even draw his own.

Forty yards. The pointing gun exploded, and to Blue Pete's surprise a stab like a knife slashed across his ear. Like a flash his own gun came out.

"Gow-swizzle, that's some shootin'," he grunted admiringly.

The man was about to fire again, but the half-breed beat him to it. The stranger's hat lifted in the air and fluttered to the dead grass as he ducked and fired wildly. Before he could aim again, a bullet tore along the cloth of his shirt sleeve, and a third knocked the gun from his hand.

Blue Pete was on him then, and, not risking a move to draw his second gun, the man pulled up and raised his right hand in the air. The half-breed drew up before him.

"Howdy, stranger? Bes' shove that other hand up an' turn round. Reckon I'd like that other shootin'-iron yuh got under yer left arm. No, donchu bother, I'll help muhself. An' yuh do' need to feel so peeved, yuh done some mighty nifty lead-slingin'. Look at this ear."

The man scowled. His eyes had roamed insultingly over the swarthy face of his captor. Blue Pete read what was in his mind and grinned.

"Shure. Jes' a breed. But yuh mus' be a stranger to Canady. Yuh don' know wot yuh got yerself intuh slingin' lead at a Mountie."

"Where I come from," snarled the man, "we ain't afeard o' nobody."

"Then yer eddication started mighty quick here, didn' it?" said Blue Pete pleasantly. "Yuh find it ain't healthy shootin' a Mountie——"

"I'd 'a' got away if yu hadn' butted in," the man, who was dressed like a cowboy, broke in furiously.

Blue Pete shook his head. "Sathun else yuh'd 'a' larned. ef yuh got any brains. Shure yuh mighta got away—fer a bit, but thar's a few hunderd Mounties to say yuh wudn' git away fer good nohow. I usta think like you do, I larned in time."

The man's teeth bared. "I'd like to see anybody git me it——"

"Wal, yuh see, doncha?"

"Yu damned breed," gnashed the man, "I'll shoot it out with you some time."

The half-breed's eyes flashed with a new eagerness. "Say, I hev'n't had a nice bit o' shootin' to kill sence I -sence a long time. Fos thing I know I'll be gittin' rusty. Besides, I owe yuh suthin' fer this car. Nobody ever got away with nothin' like that before. We gotta settle that some time. Might's well be right now." He glanced about. "Mebbe we cud git away somewhere an' see ef thar's not suthin' else fer yuh to larn, master. Here's yer gun. Le's git outa here 'fore the Mountie sees us." He handed over the gun but withdrew it as the man reached for it. "No, I jes' hold it till we git whar we kin shoot. Off this way, an' move fast. Oh, darn!"

He groaned. Over the crest of the rise not far away came the Mounted Policeman on his lumping horse. The captured man sneered.

"Reckon that saved yer skin, yu damned breed. Yu got in a shot jus' now, but yu was shootin' straight ahead. That's easy. The Mounties can't do much to me. I'll be lookin' for yu."

"I got a mighty sarchin' eye muhself fer skunks," returned Blue Pete.

CHAPTER II

DISCOMFORTABLE MEMORIES

THE Mounted Police horse jumped down the slope toward them. The Policeman's jaw was grimly set, and he looked the pair over in a cold silence as he advanced. Keeping in beside them, he dismounted and picked up the gun that had been knocked from the captive's hand. Remounting, he fixed his eyes on the half-breed's bleeding ear. But he said nothing.

The silence was broken by a low whinny from his injured horse. The eyes of the Policeman crept to his mount, then rose wondering to Blue Pete's face, and a frown gathered on his forehead. Swiftly it gave place to a flush of anger. For long seconds he stared without a word.

The half-breed had turned slightly away, his eyes dropping to the guns he carried. He squirmed. A deprecatory smile twisted the corners of his lips.

The cowboy watched for a few seconds, then satisfied that for the moment he was out of the picture, he commenced to edge his bronco away.

Blue Pete swung on him. "Stick round an' see what's he ordered. His 45 pointed."

A sharp breath holder from the Policeman. "Well, I'll be jiggered!" Instantly he became once more the cold officer of the law. He turned to the man who had so nearly escaped.

"Turn around," he snapped, "and put your hands behind your back."

A pair of handcuffs appeared. The man went under his breath, hesitated, but realized it was useless to

rest. The handcuffs snapped over his wrists. The Policeman seized the bronco's reins and faced it southwards.

"Keep going that way. I know who you are. You're Bill Scarway from over the border. We've been on the look-out for you."

"What if I am?" snarled the man. "Yu got no right to arrest me."

"You can talk that over with the Inspector. Just now you're doing what you're told."

"I'm an American citizen," blustered Scarway. "You can't——"

"We're not holding that against you. But don't tell me what I can't do. I'm doing it. I can't arrest you, eh? Take a look at that crease on my horse. Perhaps you imagine you can shoot about you like that in Canada. You've a lot to learn on this side of the border, Scarway."

"I was jus' ridin' along," protested Scarway, "doin' nobody no harm. Then you got after me. I shot in self-defence. Yu got nossey——"

The Policeman gave the bronco a kick and started it forward. He laughed. "Yea, it's one of our disagreeable habits—nosmess. Self-defence? There's no self-defence against the Mounted Police. When we come on a rogue with your record we get so nossey we put the handcuffs on and then make inquiries. Now keep going."

He turned to frown on Blue Pete. "You too," he ordered gruffly.

The half-breed sighed. "Got 'nother pair o' bracelets?" he inquired.

The Policeman flushed. "That depends on you. In the meantime I'll take those guns. No, yours, too," as the half-breed started to shove his .45 in his belt.

Blue Pete hesitated and a scowl gathered on his forehead. "I ain't useta givin' it up to nobody."

"You're giving it up to me."

"Me 'n Whiskers we're sartin to get skittish 'bout it, we're useta bein' heeled."

"I suppose even the pinto knows how badly you need a gun," said the Policeman sarcastically.

"Howju know?"

The Policeman looked him over witheringly. "I've a long memory. What else have you and the pinto been up to to make a gun necessary?"

Blue Pete tilted his head and squinted toward the sky. "Las' thing I 'member was stoppin' a skunk fer a Mounse."

Again the Policeman flushed. "At any rate you're coming in with me. And I'm taking your guns. You won't need them any more till we get in."

Blue Pete handed his .45 over.

The sudden pound of retreating hoofs brought them about with a jerk. Scarway, once more taking advantage of their preoccupation, had struck his spurs into the ribs of his mount and was racing away.

The Policeman's rifle was jerked from his holster, but he dare not use it.

"Get after him," he ordered, turning to Blue Pete.

The half-breed shook his head. "Not 'bout mah six-shooter. I cud 'a' winged him ef I'd had it." He reached for his rifle. "Whar'll I hit 'im, muster?"

The Policeman spurred before him. "You mustn't shoot him. You can overtake him again with that pinto. My horse is used up."

"Whiskers 'n' me s bun ridin' fer days," muttered the half-breed stubbornly. "Gittin' that Scarway fer yuh ain't our job—not fer no Mounse wot takes our .45."

The gun was tossed to him. He caught it and thrust it in his belt. He laughed.

"Reckon I don' need it none here. An' I am' gon' to push Whiskers w'en it am' needed. That felluh's yeller. See ef he ain't."

Before he could be stopped he whipped his rifle forward and fired. The Policeman, holding his breath, faced about. He was in time to see the galloping bronco leap into the air and land—and stand still, its left leg hanging limp. Scarway had shouted and rolled from the saddle. The bronco recovered, limped a few steps and stopped.

The Policeman's face went pale. "You—you've done for him!" he gasped.

"Not like I'd liketa. Jcs' got his leg an' the cayuse a hip in line. Sorta killed two birds with one shot. They ain't hurt none o' them."

Scarway had rolled to his knees. His hands, bound together behind his back, moved up and down helplessly. The Policeman started toward him.

"You might have killed him," he protested.

"Not ef I didn' wanta," returned Blue Pete. "Reckon yuh dunno me, mister. I cud 'a' shot his ear off." He rubbed his own injured ear. "Clean forgot er I mighta."

The Policeman's jaws snapped together. "I know you only too damned well."

He trotted to the outlaw who was cursing volubly and struggling to get to his feet. A thin scarlet line had appeared down the side of his chaps. The same colour trickled down the bronco's hip. The Policeman drew up beside them.

"Shut up!" he ordered. "If I'd been shooting I might have been less considerate."

"It's that damned breed again," snarled Scarway. "I wish I had a gun."

Blue Pete rubbed his lips and grinned sheepishly at the Mounted Policeman.

"Say, mister," he pleaded, "can't yuh jes' turn yer head fer a few minutes—an' lend im that gun o' his. Don' seem jes' sorta fair to lock 'im up fer a year er two 'thout givin' 'im suthin' to 'member. This shootin' iron o' mine's gittin' sorta lonesome fer some real shootin'. He ain't goin' to git away ef yuh look t'other way. I got this ear to settle fer some time. I'd leave yuh 'nuff to put in jail."

The Policeman made a gesture of impatience. "Stop this foolishness. You're both coming in, and no more delay. Get on that horse, Scarway."

"How the hell can I, with my hands tied behind my back?"

Blue Pete dismounted. "That's easy." He approached the outlaw, who aimed a kick at him. The half-breed caught the raised foot, jerked its owner off balance, gathered him in his arms, and threw him across the saddle. "Gittin' real sassy, ain't yuh. You 'n' me cud have some real fun. Mebbe we will some day."

He mounted and addressed the Policeman. "Yuh say I gotta go 'long, an' 'tain't wot I come fer. I'm in a hurry, so let's git goin'."

They started away at a slow lope, for two of the horses limped. Scarway rode ahead, directing his mount with his knees. It was a trained cowpony and, accordingly, accustomed to such direction. The Mounted Policeman and the half-breed fell in behind. For several minutes nothing was said. Finally the former spoke.

"You say you're in a hurry. What's your business?"

Blue Pete considered it for several seconds. "Yuh woda' be untrusted, mister."

"You mean you're afraid to tell me."

That, too, was carefully considered. "Mebbe yuh're right."

"You appear to think it's none of my business."

"Wal, I know the Mounties make ever'thun' thar business."

"Can you suggest anything in the West that isn't?"

"I ain't suggestin' nothin'. But I got mah own thoughts."

Again a long silence. And again it was broken by the Policeman.

"I suppose you have some idea how and why we get into the Force. One qualification is that we never forget a face."

"Then I'd make a dandy Mountie," said Blue Pete.

"And perhaps you know how long our memories are, and what we do about it when we remember a rogue."

"That don' bother me none—mostly. It don't 'less I make a darn fool o' munsself . . . Thar's times I do."

"Yes, I should say so," agreed the Policeman dryly.

"And you appear to be able to add two and two. Now what would you do in a case like this? A few weeks ago—let's see, it would be just before that snowstorm—I was called to attend to a tramp who was stealing a ride on a train from Medicine Hat. I chased him off—"

"Mebbe he had to git somewhars," suggested the half-breed, his eyes twinkling.

"I've no doubt about that. But it's part of our business to see that it isn't done at the expense of the railways. Stealing rides is stealing, you know."

Blue Pete rubbed his chin reflectively. "Mebbe the chap jes' didn' wanta be seed."

"I've no doubt about that either. At any rate he was ridin' the rods, and that's against the law, and

we're here to enforce the law . . . But that wasn't the worst he did. I didn't wish to arrest him, only to drive him from the train. I did succeed in that."

"I bet he was durn sore," chuckled Blue Pete. "Yuh drove him off the train down here whar he a.n.t got no friends er nothin', an' no place to go. So wot cud he do?"

"I'll tell you what he did do." The Policeman stopped to shout an order to Scarway to bear a little to the left. "He saw to it that he wasn't stranded here where he had no friends. He rode off on my horse!"

He raised his eyes abruptly to Blue Pete's face, his teeth clamped tightly together.

"Wal, I'd be gor-swizzled!" exclaimed the half-breed with affected innocence. "I bet he jes' saw suthin' to git away on an' he grabbed it. He didn't think —"

"It was horse-stealing, and that's a mighty serious offence here in the West."

"Did yuh ever git the hoss back, master?"

"Ye-es, a couple of weeks later."

"An' was it hurt any er used up?"

"No-o."

"An' was thar an'thin' missin'?"

"No, but——"

"Then yuh otta think yerself durn lucky. Showed the chap wasn' stealin' nothin'. He was jes' gittin' thar."

"Getting where?" demanded the Policeman.

Blue Pete shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. "Course I dunno." He added brightly. "Thought I was gittin' thar too till I heerd Scarway shoot yer cayuse."

"Never mind that, it's not what we're talking about. The Mounted Police can't afford to let a thing like

that pass, you know. The Inspector gave me a terrible calling-down——"

Blue Pete widened his eyes in affected innocence. "The Mountie was you? Wal, I'll be—— Say, I know wot them Inspectors can do in the way o' callin'-down. We got one up at the Hat. He's like that. . . . But mebbe the tramp d,dn' mean nothin' nasty, he didn't think 'bout hurtin' the feelin's o' the Mounties. Mebbe he'll be able to do suthan' fer yuh some day——"

"Get along faster," shouted the Policeman at Scarway.

"You haven't told me yet what you think should be done to a chap like that," he continued, after a few seconds.

Blue Pete solemnly considered it. "Wal, in the fus' place it wasn' stealin', not zackly. An' it shows how sorry he was w'en he brung yer cayuse back, an' he ain't likely to hev no hard feelin's 'gain the Mounties. So w'y make him sore w'en thar ain't nobody hurt none but on'y some feelin's that nobody's goin' to know nothin' 'bout ef the Mountie don' tell."

A collection of buildings appeared against the skyline. The smoke from a train trailed across the horizon.

"Which way were you going?" enquired the Policeman.

"Off thar." Blue Pete pointed vaguely toward the mountains.

"If you need a rest, or want a place to sleep," offered the Policeman, "I'll find it for you."

"Whiskers 'n' me sleep whar we happen to be."

"Then so long."

"S'long."

CHAPTER III

MIRA INTERVIEWS

THERE were urgent reasons why Blue Pete did not wish to crowd not indeed tell why he was there or whether he was going. His main-bunt he had undertaken was strictly legal in that it was backed by Mounted Police authority, but it was as strict y between himself and Inspector Barker back at Medicine Hat. The Mounted detachment to which his companions belonged, had no share in its prosecution and no knowledge of its existence.

In that Inspector Barker had gone beyond the rules of the Force. But he too, had his reasons. For one thing he preferred to run down his own criminals when their crimes were committed in his district. But more compelling was the fact that the man he had selected to carry on the hunt had no official connection with the Mounted Police, and his part in it had to be concealed at all cost.

In the Inspector's summing up of the situation he had not been able to see a chance of success for anyone else except after a long and expensive chase, and he was too short-handed to spare a man. Frenchy Thoreau, so recently a butcher in the neighbouring village of Irvine, had been found to be rustling cattle, not only for his butcher shop but for the loose market offered across the border in Montana. Too late to arrest him the discovery was made, for Frenchy had eluded them. To that end he had staged a fake drowning accident in the South Saskatchewan that ran through the hollow within which lay the town of

Medicine Hat. The Mounted Police had accepted the evidence of drowning until Blue Pete had come on the scene and exposed French's game.¹

When upon the half-breed whose association with the Mounted Police had always been unofficial since a judge, on learning that he had once been a rustler himself, has refused to accept his expert evidence on the manipulation of trails,² had been selected to undertake the capture of the elusive rustler.

Thoreau, with Indian blood in his veins, Blue Pete quickly discovered had made for the foothills far to the west where he would find refuge in the Indian encampments located in the valleys of that broken country. There, disguised as an Indian, he seemed secure, but the half-breed had run his living-place down. Yet the early stages of the pursuit had been interrupted by a much more important private concern — the recovery of his beloved, as from a renegade Medicine Hat Indian, Grey Coyote, who had himself fled to the foothills to escape Blue Pete.

The gun had been recovered after stirring adventure, great risk, and much good fortune,³ and Grey Coyote had paid for his rashness with his life. But in the prosecution of that search it had happened that Thoreau and the half-breed had crossed each other's paths more than once, on each occasion one or the other saving the other's life.

Returned to Medicine Hat by Sergeant Mahon, who had gone to find him, Blue Pete, accused of murdering Grey Coyote, had once more taken up Thoreau's trail. And in following that trail no one knew so well as Inspector Barker that his very job probably depended on keeping secret the use he was making of the half-breed for Blue Pete's methods.

¹ Blue Pete, Rebel.

² Blue Pete, Half-Breed.

³ Blue Pete, Rebel.

were too unconventional to be recognized officially, productive and successful as they always were.

The intervention of Eugene Thorneau in the pursuit of Larry Coyote had interjected considerations embarrassing to the half breed. To fail to capture or death a man who had saved his life more than once was not to Blue Pete's liking, but having given his promise to the Inspector nothing was going to turn him aside.

Even Mura, his white wife, had interjected for Frenchy. She had tried to talk him out of continuing the chase, but Blue Pete had always stood stubbornly against breaking his promise. Besides, the Inspector depended on him. And he knew only too well that Mura's concern was not for Frenchy, but for himself. For Frenchy was an expert shot. He and the half breed had always been rivals in the shooting contests until the latter's string of unbroken victories had stepped aside. Frenchy had not been satisfied, it rankled with him that as he saw it they had never put their marksmanship to the real test of blood. And so each occasion when they had come to each other's rescue, each saving the other for the head reckoning, had ended with an agreement to shoot to kill on their next meeting.

It so happened too that their last meeting was marked by Larry Coyote's death. Blue Pete recklessly exposing himself in his impatience would probably have fallen to the Indian's gun had not Thorneau picked the latter off from hiding just as he was about to shoot. And Sergeant Mahon arriving on the scene at that moment had seen Blue Pete as the murderer. Friend though he was, he had taken him back to Medicine Hat under the charge of murder.

The accusation rankled with the half breed, for it had placed him in a relationship with the Inspector and with his own best friend, the Sergeant that he

his pride and, for the first time since a period of lawlessness, had accused him of a major crime, to be dealt with ruthlessly by those who were his friends.

"He 'most had me hung fer it," he protested to his wife's arguments. "An' 'twas the Sergeant ran me in. He—he thought I was a murderer!"

It hurt, for he and the Sergeant had been such friends. Many a time they had been in tight spots together and had fought their way out. To the most dangerous cases they were always assigned, either singly or together. It had led to implicit confidence in each other.

Mira had continued to argue. "You can't blame the Sergeant. All he saw when he came up was Grey Coyote dead and you standing beside him. Frenchy wasn't in sight. You didn't even see him yourself. But he sure saved your life."

But Blue Pete was not prepared to admit that he needed anyone to save his life. Even the suggestion of it rankled. Ever since he could remember he had fought his own battles, had faced the worst a wild and reckless outlaw was called on to face on both sides of the border, first in Montana and later in Canada. It had taught him to rely on his own gun and cunning—and, he would always insist, on Whiskers, the tireless little pinto.

"I kin look after muhself," he growled. . . . "Sides, I promised th' Inspector."

Whereupon Mira had even made an excuse to ride the eighty miles from the 3-Bar-Y into town and had crossed the railway tracks to the barracks and had bearded Inspector Barker in his untidy office.

The Inspector, seated as always behind his desk, just where he could look through the window and

see everything that happened along South Railway Street, saw her coming and was to some extent prepared. But the prospect of the interview made him uneasy.

And so he received her with every evidence of pressing business waiting for his attention. Pen in hand with official paper before him on the desk, he kept her waiting inside the door for several moments before turning toward her.

"Oh, hello, Mira! What can I do for you?"

The affected heartiness and surprise failed to deceive her. She knew that nothing transpired beyond that window that escaped him, and she stood peering into his face through so extended a silence that his eyes dropped away, and he commenced to fuss at the tobacco scattered untidily about the pouch that lay on the blotter.

It was he who spoke again. "I'm afraid this is no place to receive a lady, Mira." He managed a laugh. "And I don't encourage them, we'd rather not have to deal with them. As criminals I mean, of course," he added hastily. "If it were your husband now he'd know how to help me clean this mess of tobacco up. He rather likes to smoke it."

She stepped forward without a word and seated herself in the vacant chair beside the desk.

"If it was Pete," she replied, "I wouldn't dare be here with him now."

Inspector Parker sighed. "What trouble's he got himself into now?"

"None yet."

"What do you mean by that, Mira?"

"You know what I mean. You know the danger there is for anyone who takes after Frenchy Thoreau."

The Inspector fiddled with a letter-opener. "Has he started yet?"

"No. And I don't want him to."

The Inspector shrugged. "What have I to do with it. He's the one to see —"

"He promised to get Frenchy for you. You know he'll carry through that promise."

"He'd have had it done long ago if he'd stuck to the job," grumbled the Inspector. "He had no right to risk his life to get that old 45 of his back when he had more important things to do."

"They were not more important to Pete. And they weren't more important to you. You know he has to have that gun; he doesn't feel at home with any other, and you know the tight places you get him into where he's got to feel comfortable to pull through. Besides, he couldn't afford to let the Indians get away with anything like that. If he did his life wouldn't be worth a cuss, and he couldn't do for you what he does if the Indians thought they could do a thing like that. You know anyway, you've got to let him do things his own way or they won't be done."

And mostly they can't be done by anyone else. Besides, if Sergeant Mahon hadn't brought him in he'd probably have Frenchy for you before this."

The Inspector gazed vacantly through the window, rocking in his rickety tilting chair.

"The Sergeant could do nothing else. The trouble was that Blue Pete withheld the whole story till he got back here——"

He told what he knew—that he hadn't shot Grey Coyote. He didn't see who did. The Sergeant wouldn't believe him. Did you ever know Pete to lie?"

"Well," squirming, "we can't afford to take anyone's word when it comes to murder. You can't blame the Sergeant. Besides," angrily, "you know damn well Blue Pete let himself be brought in just to get the Sergeant away from the foothills."

"Sure he did. When Pete undertakes a thing alone he wants to carry it through alone. You should never have sent the sergeant after him."

"We hadn't heard a word from him . . . Besides, there was that Mounted Police horse he stole. We had to——"

Mira straightened, and her eyes flashed. "You know he doesn't steal."

The Inspector's eyes twinkled. "I seem to remember a busy time we had with him once for stealing."¹

"That was rustling," Mira defended weakly. "You know why he went back to it."

"Huh! And I imagine it would take mighty little to send him back to it again. That's what makes him so difficult for us."

He swung suddenly about in the swivel chair and faced her. "Look here, Mira, you know him better than I do. You must be aware of the problem he is. Oh, I know how valuable he is to us," he continued, waving her to silence as she commenced to speak. "I confess that sometimes I wonder what we'd do without him. I don't think you can accuse me of ingratitude, but our work has to follow certain rather well-defined lines or I get into trouble with the public and with my superiors. That's why I daren't employ him openly, daren't tell anyone how I use him. God knows—and you and I know—how widely Pete has diverged from those lines of ours. And then when it's over I have to lie and turn a blind eye, just to save my own head as well as his."

Mira sighed and nodded. "But it's because he works that way that he succeeds where no one else would, Inspector."

They were silent for a time, the Inspector wondering

¹ *The Return of Blue Pete.*

what was coming. At last he came to the point.
"Just why are you here, Mira?"

She shuffled her chair nearer the desk and looked appealingly into his face. "I want you to call him off Frenchy Thoreau. He gave you a promise, he won't break it unless you say so."

The Inspector frowned at her. "You mean we're to let Frenchy get away with what he's done?"

"Put someone else on his trail."

"I can't spare a man. Besides, you say yourself only Blue Pete can do these things." He scowled more deeply. "Am I to understand that he has put you up to this? Is he afraid?"

Mira's eyes blazed with anger. "You know he isn't afraid of anyone. If he was," she added, with a wry twist of her lips, "he'd start right out to face it and find out why."

"Then it's you that's frightened."

She nodded. "Surely Pete's done enough for you, surely he's faced enough danger to be let off this one. Frenchy'll shoot to kill, and he's a dead shot. And he's got brains and cunning, and he's more cautious than Pete. He and Pete have warned each other they'll shoot to kill. . . Besides we owe Frenchy a lot. he saved Pete's life more than once."

"More than once?"

"Yes. There's the time you know—when he shot Grey Coyote, and he saved Pete from the blizzard right after Pete saved the Sergeant."

Inspector Barker laid a gentle hand on the small one on the table. "See here, Mira, you're not looking at this affair in the right way. In the first place, I've got to get Frenchy Thoreau, and I'm not going to stop at the means I use if they're even decently reput-

1 Blue Pete Rebel

able. Our first job is to get our man. Blue Pete is the only sure method I know of.

"But there's much more to it than that. Do you know your husband so little as to think I could call him off? I couldn't. I might give the order, but what would be the result? He'd defy me, yes, defy me. There's much more to his getting Thoreau than his promise to me. In the first place, if I called him off he'd know it was because you had asked it. Then where would you be? In the second place, he'd carry on against my orders—and without the restraint my orders apply. He and Thoreau have something to settle between them. Thoreau had him accused of murder, and that has to be settled, too.

"No, Mira, it can't be done, not for your sake, or Pete's, or mine. He promised me Thoreau would do no more rustling around Medicine Hat, and that looks up with all the rest to make it impossible at this date to interfere. Go home and say nothing about this. I won't. And I've faith enough in that husband of yours to believe that he'll pull through, as he always does—and the Mounted Police will 'get their man'. And damn the writers who put that in print, to be always thrown at us."

CHAPTER IV

A ROPELESS APPEAL

MIRA could do nothing further. In her heart she knew that the Inspector was right—nothing he or she could do at that stage would prevent Blue Pete from a settlement with Frenchy Thoreau. Yet she would not give up entirely.

And so on her return to the ranch she revived the subject. It was difficult for Blue Pete was on guard against it. So often had she turned the conversation in that direction that he had grown almost sullen about it. She knew what that meant. She had had occasion to fear that stubbornness, and to realize that undue pressure only drove him to recklessness. This was more evident in affairs that promised danger and threatened his pride or his honour.

On her return to the ranch she found him oiling his saddle. She knew what that meant—that he was preparing for some undertaking where even the creak of a saddle might expose him to danger. Beside him on the table lay two freshly cleaned guns, one of them his beloved .45.

Outside a chill wind howled about the house. For the last twenty miles she had ridden with it pressing harshly from the south-west. Whiter her mount had disliked it and had at times been difficult to handle. The fight with him had sharpened her temper a little, so that she approached the final stage of her husband's determination with less reluctance than she had felt at the earlier prospect of it.

He had come to the door, as he always did, when

she rode down the slope and he had whistled for Jake, a cowboy at the bunkhouse to come and take Whitey. Their exchange of greetings had not varied, it was never more than "h'lo, Mura'" and "h'lo, Pete!" Then leaving the horse to wander on alone to the stable, he had returned to his task, leaving her to close the door.

"Blows like a storm," she remarked, as she removed her gauntlets on the way to their bedroom off the living-room.

Even in that casual remark was evident something of what was in her mind, and Blue Pete did not fail to recognize it. The usual early September blizzard had come and gone, one of the worst the West had ever experienced. Blue Pete himself, accustomed as he was to everything the prairie had to offer, had almost lost his life in it, saved only by the man he had undertaken to run down.

He picked up a stirrup leather and worked it in his powerful hands. "No storm," he granted, which was rather resistance to the thought in her mind than conviction of the truth of what he said.

"We're in for some chilly nights," she persisted from the bedroom.

"Lots o' dandy days yet," he growled.

There was little more that could be said on the subject, and she was wise enough to refrain from making an issue of such a trivial subject. But as she bustled about the preparation of the meal, showing no weariness from the long ride, she persisted.

"They're saying in town we're in for a long, hard winter, and an early one. It was in the papers."

"'Tain't so," he declared.

"The men who are paid to know these things, to read what the weather's going to be, have it in all the papers."

"Hub! I cud tell 'em better 'bout pay. Looksee, the birds know, don't they? The gophers know, an' the c'yutes. Wal the birds is still buzzin' 'bout the Hills, an' the gophers an' c'yutes ain't busy like they'd be ef winter was comin' soon."

She knew that he knew that too often his very life had depended on reading the weather, and once more the way appeared to be blocked to the subject uppermost in her mind. For a long time she worked in silence, while he packed oil into the stiff weather-beaten leather grunting as he worked, now and then whistling tunelessly through his teeth. She knew too, only too well what the whistling meant—that he did not wish to talk.

"We can get that new part added to the stable before the snow comes, then, maybe," she ventured, "if we get right at it. And we could fence off that alkali slough where the cattle get mired."

She had placed the meal on the table. He brought his chair and seated himself without replying. Until his piled plate lay before him and he had adjusted the chair to his liking his feet wound about its legs, he made no comment. Then

"Nuck an' Jake an' Chuck kin git at it. Tex don' need 'em jes' now. Cattle's quiet this weather an' near home. Thar won't be no more thunder. An' that slough ain't our job. Thar's lots other ranches shudotta git busy more'n us on it."

He loaded his knife with potatoes and bore it to his lips. A cavernous mouth opened and the load disappeared. A slow grin, surprisingly gentle, creased his dark face.

"Yuh jes' ain' smart 'nuff to git 'way with it, Mura. Yuh do want me to git off on that h'l job, do yuh?"

She was unprepared for the sudden attack, and colour flooded her face. He saw it from the corner of

his crooked eyes, and his hand started toward hers. But almost as it started it stopped, and he swung it aside to reach for the salt.

"Yuh sorta got things by this time, Mira, whar yuh gum-shoe it all round wot yuh wanta say, donchu? Yuh're skeered I'll git up agin Frenchy an' git the wast of it, eh?"

She reached across the table and shyly touched his hand. At the touch he held his breath and was still.

"I wish you wouldn't, Pete."

"Skeered I'll git hicked, eh?"

"It's not that. Nobody can lick you if you have a chance, but Frenchy won't give you that."

Blue Pete shook his head and frowned. "Yuh're wrong thar, Mira. Frenchy's a good sport. He cud 'a' did fer me lots o' times ef he'd bin wantin' to git nasty like that. But he isn't that kind."

"No," she agreed eagerly for he had innocently swung the discussion where she wished it, "perhaps he wouldn't. You mustn't forget, Pete, all he's done for you."

He raised his eyes and scowled at her. "Reckon we're 'bout even on that."

"He saved your life twice."

"I done the same fer him."

They ate in silence for several minutes.

"Sides," he went on, "I promised th' Inspector Frenchy'd do no more rustin' 'bout these parts."

"The Inspector'd let you off if you'd ask."

"Yuh mean—yuh mean"—he glared at her—"yuh'd want me to ast to let Frenchy go 'cause—'cause yuh're skeered I'll git hurt? 'Cause that's wot yuh're skeered of. 'Tain't wot Frenchy done. I done mah own job—gittin' back the 45. Now I'm goin' to do th' Inspector's. Say, w'y shud I ast him to drop it now? I ain't skeered. Ef I was I'd shure git out

to find out w'y An't bin skcered o' nothin' yet 't I know of."

He leaned his arms on the table and peered into her face. "How'd yuh know he'd lemme off? Yuh bin talkin' to um, that's wot. That's w'y yuh went to town. Yuh bin tryin' to get 'im to call me off. —"

Tears stood in her eyes and she returned his gaze. "I don't want you to get hurt any more, Pete. Surely you've suffered enough for the Mounties."

"Yuh think -yuh think I'd get hurt, eh?" He had looked quickly away, unable to face her tears. "An' mebbe yuh're right. I dunno. . . . That's wot makes it I gotta find out. Is Frenchy goin' to get me er t'other way 'bout? An' the on'y way to find out is to git out an'—an' find out, ain't it?"

He smiled shyly. "No, Mira, 'tain't goin' to be no early winter, an' the boys kin get the new stable up 'thout me, an' the slough ain't our business an' th' Inspector ain't goin' to call me off Frenchy an' I shure ain't goin' to ast him to. . . . An' so I'm gittin' along on wot I promised to do. Say, ef th' Inspector ast me to call it off, ef he sent somebody else I c' git out an' beat him to it. I got things to find out 'bout Frenchy, an' I shure owe him a grudge fer gittin' me hauled up fer murder wen it was him shot that skunk Grey C yote."

"No, sit ee, Mira. I'm gittin' out on the job right away. The saddle'll be in fine shape to-morrow mornin' an' Whiskers 's jes' b'lin' to git goin', an' that's lots o' dandy days yet."

Mira sighed hopelessly. "Where will you make for?"

"Fer the foothills, o' course."

"He won't be there now."

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "I bin thinkin' 'bout that. Mebbe he's skipped, mebbe not. Ef he has, that's whar I'll find out whar he is. . . . But

I'm bettin' he ain't skipped. He knows we got suthin' to settle, an' he wants to settle it most 's much as I do. One of us gotta be the bes' shot, an' we gotta know w'ich 'tis. Frenchy ain't skeered. . . . An' as fer doin' things fer each other, I reckon we're 'bout even." He considered that and shook his head. "No, mebbe yuh're right. he's got one up on me thar, 'cause 'twasn't much I done fer him both times. An' doncha be skeered Frenchy won't play the game. He wil."

"I won't know where you are or what's happened," she sighed.

"Reckon mebbe yuh won't. I ain't much of a writer. Sides, I'll be dang busy ef things go like I want." He grinned. "But yuh kin bet yer ass c'yuse that I'm hevun' a real good time. Chasin' Frenchy Thorcan's gon' to be lots o' fun."

"And lots of danger," she interposed.

"Same thing," he declared.

CHAPTER V

TAKING A NEW JOB

THE little spotted pinto and the ugly, cross-eyed half breed rode slowly away into the west avoiding the town. On a rise beyond the last houses Blue Pete pulled up and looked back. The sun was setting behind him throwing long shadows down the slope. It was still warm on neck and shoulder. He had turned his back on an artist's dream, the haze before the western mountains. The sunlight drifting through a rift in the peaks lay softly over the roofs below him. Movement was there but no sound. Every sound seemed to have been muted by the approach of evening. Two automobiles came to a stop before a store, a cowboy leaped lazily down the main street. And then even movement ceased. It was like a picture.

Suddenly the spell was broken. Far to the east a train whistled and presently a shaky line of cars crawled into sight beneath a soft streak of smoke. The sound brought the town to life. The automobiles started, two dogs commenced to fight, several men rushing to part them. And out from a street where they had been hidden by the bushes rode the Mounted Policeman and his prisoner.

Blue Pete watched them for a moment. Tough guy, he muttered to the pinto. Shoot it out with him some time. Gotta. He giv me a sore ear. On'y he won't be no Frenchy, he'll shoot in the back an' brag 'bout it."

He turned back toward the mountains and started away.

"Gittin' 'way from all that now, ole gal. The Mounties'll send Scarway down fer a coupla years fer shootin' kneeless. You 'n me s got suthin' else to think of anyways, an' it's goun' to take all our time . . . 'less Frenchy's skipped an' fooled me. No danger o' that, I'm thinkin'. You 'n' me know him too well. He ain't goan' to rest till we hev it out, an' he knows I ain't."

He drew the .45 from his belt and gazed fondly down on it. His eyes ran over the nicks in the butt, counting them automatically.

"Gotta be one more thar 'fore winter, an' it don't lee me much time, not fer a sly chap like Frenchy Thoreau. I don't hanker fer no more snow here in the foothills."

He thrust the gun back slowly, a slight frown lining his brow. His head shook irritably.

"An' she said he's saved me twicet. Wal, ain't we 'bout even in that? I saved 'im from the snow after he saved me, an' Grey C yote 'ud a' got 'im shure ef I hedn' warned him with that shot . . . ¹

"Course 'tain't quite the same. I was shure done fer ef he hadn' showed up both times, an' it makes me darn mad. Suthin' like that's allus happenin' to make me mad. I ain't useta hev'in' nobody save me, an' I don't like it none neither. Do make me like Frenchy no more. He ain got no right to butt in, not w'en I'm after 'im. 'Tain't playin' the game . . . Wot'd she wanta throw that at me fer? I don't owe nobody nothin'—'ceptin' mebbe th' Inspector fer that promise."

He shook his head peevishly, as one shakes off an annoying fly, and churred to Whiskers.

Darkness lay thinly about him, blurring the increasing rolls of the prairie, before he spoke again.

¹ *Blue Pete Retold*.

"Looks like 'nother night out ole gal . . . an' thar'll be lots more. Hope it don' git too cold fer yuh. Do wanta hev to lay yuh up nowhars, like I done with that P'lee horse. Le's see, that was the Circle K. Otta be gittin' somewhars near 'bout thar soon." He looked around. "Do wanta do thout yuh, ole gal, an' I bet yuh don' want me to. 'Sorta wanta be together in this sorta country. 'Tain't our sort, all these hulla an' things. Sorta think I'll need yuh, too. Thar's Injuns in them foothills, an' they don' like me no more'n I do them. He laughed as the pinto's head shook violently. "Yuh bet yuh don' like 'em no better neither. Looks aw right here," he commented presently.

Down below, in a coulee, a stream rippled a winding course. A herd of cattle fed along both sides of the hollow. On the far side of the herd a pair of cowboys lounged in their saddles, smoking and talking. As yet they had not seen the newcomers.

For a few moments Blue Pete eyed them, sitting motionless. Then his head shook.

"No time to git too chummy with nobody," he muttered. "They don'y ast questions an' we ain' got the answers. We'll mosey along this crick, ole gal. Yuh mus' be gittin' thirsty same's I am."

The cowboys saw them then and one of them called out. But with a wave of his hand the half-breed turned away, joggng out of sight. A few minutes later the familiar warning that he was observed made him turn his head. One of the cowboys had ridden through the coulee and was watching him from a height, his eyes shaded by one hand against the western sky.

Blue Pete looked thoughtful. "I ain' done nothin' Wonder wot's up."

For half an hour longer the pinto loped along, verging toward the south-west, and presently the half-

breed reached a height from which he saw below him the stream where the cows had settled down for the night. Carefully scanning the prairie to make sure he was unobserved, he rode into the depression, and horse and rider drank. Down then the chill of evening was more apparent and Blue Pete removing saddle and bridle and leaving Whiskers free to forage, climbed back to the height and lay down with the saddle-blanket wrapped about him, his head resting on the saddle. In a few seconds he was fast asleep. Whiskers ate ravenously of the lush grass beside the stream, then climbed and lay down beside her master.

The sun was rising when the pinto gently nuzzled the half-breed. His eyes opened with the instant wariness of one who must ever be prepared for danger. For a moment he lay listening without moving, then, raising slowly to his elbow, he looked about.

"Wanta git goin', ole gal," he asked.

Whiskers pushed him more violently.

"Aw right, aw right, don' git rough. Who told yuh I was in a hurry?"

In a few minutes they were on their way. Whiskers fought for her head, but Blue Pete held her in.

"Easy, easy, ole gal. I gotta do some thinkin'. Will we take a chance an' stop at the Circle R or not? Boin' that mabe heerd aithin' we wanta know. No," he decided. "he d' ast questions. We'll mos'ly on into the foothills an' trust to luck. But whar to?" he asked himself impatiently after a time. "All them Nechee camps is his friends, an' they ain't fond o' me. You 'n' me, ole gal's gotta buck a few hundred dirty Neches."

"But Frenchy'll play fair," he added judicially. "He ain't goin' to ast no help from nobody. He do' need it . . . But them Neches do' need no astin'."

neither You 'n' me's going to hev to dodge bullets ag'n, ole gal, like we allus gotta w'en thar's Injuns around Hell-o!"

The exclamation burst from him as a rider suddenly appeared over a rise directly before him. They saw each other at the same time. Instinctively the half-breed shifted direction. He did not wish to talk to anyone. But the other rider turned to head him off. In a moment or two he waved and shouted.

Blue Pete sighed. "It's him—that Suffron of the Circle R," he grumbled. "Suthin's allus happenin' me like this." He drew up and waited.

The rancher struck his heels into his horse and cantered up. He was a short, round man, and he rode more stiffly than a cowboy.

"Why, hello!" he exclaimed, as he drew in beside the pinto. "Who'd have thought to meet you again? What the blazes are you doing in these parts this time? I thought that Sergeant had you up for something serious the last time I saw you, though you both tried to cover it up."

Blue Pete grinned. "Funny how folks go guessin' w'en they ain' got real work to do. Reckon yuh made a mistake that time, Mister Suffron."

"What's brought you back again?" Suffron's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Jes' lookin' 'bout."

"Last time you were hunting cougars in the foot-hills—or you said you were."

"Didn' get none, so mebbe I'm tryin' it ag'in."

"And maybe you're not." Suffron eyed him for a moment, then turned to the pinto. His nose tilted up. "Different beast you got under you this time. What happened that fine big horse you had last time? You promised to let me have him if you ever sold him."

"I hev'n sold 'im "

"You didn't trad him, I hope, for that runt "

Blue Pete's eyes flashed, and he leaned forward to pat the pinto's neck.

"This runt," he declared slowly, "kin give any c'yuse yuh got a mile in five an' beat yuh out. She kin go thar an' back w'ile you re goin'. She'll do 'er handerd an' twenty mile a day, an' hev 'noft let' to carry me home—no matter whar home is. An' she knows ever' word yuh say, an' yuh'd bes' keep 'way from 'er heels an' 'er teeth. That's the sort of a runt she is, Mister Suffron. Wanta try 'er out?"

Suffron laughed. "I suppose you know your mount. I'm apologizing to her. She looks like a good cow-pony at any rate."

"Say, Whiskers kin cut out any cow yuh want from the biggest herd yuh ever seen, an' she'll do it 'thout nobody on 'er back. Ef she didn't need 'er feet to run with she cud hogtie it too. I'll put 'er 'n' me ag'in any two punchers yuh got, to do an'thin' yuh got to do."

Suffron appeared to have an idea. "Looking for a job, you two?"

Blue Pete's eyes screwed up thoughtfully. "Dunno's we are."

"If you are I can use you "

"Short-handed?"

"As things are I am. There's funny work goin' on here near the foothills. I'm losin' cattle, and it isn't just strays. You see, we're near the border here, it gives a rustler a chance to shoot the cows across. But we've been free of rustlers for a couple of years and more."

"The Injuns?" Blue Pete asked.

Suffron shook his head. "I can't think so. We have the same Indians we've always had. They've never

dared to rustle; they're too frightened of the Mounted Police. All they want is to be let alone, they don't want a Mounted Policeman to come near them. No, I can't think it's they."

Blue Pete's lips puckered to a soundless whistle. "W'en did this rustlin' start?"

"Within the last few weeks."

"Got the Mounties at it yet?"

"Not yet. I've been too busy. Several of the ranches are complaining. We want to be sure before we get the law at work."

"Don' tell the Mounties."

"Why?" Suspicion returned to Saffron's eyes.

"Wanta stop it?"

"Sure I do. That's why I can give you a job riding herd. We've got to guard the herds now. We've fallen into careless habits."

"I'll take a job, but not ridin' herd. I'll stop the rustlin'."

"You will? How?"

"I'll take the job on. That's all yuh need know. Happens to fit in with 'nother job I got on hand."

"Another job? What is it?"

"That don' matter none."

Saffron was far from satisfied. For a time he regarded the half breed doubtfully.

"All right. What's the pay?"

"Nothin'. On'y jes don' git astin' things. W'en yu lose the las' bunch?"

"Four or five nights ago we missed part of a herd that usually feeds west of here. I had a cowboy night-hawking them, but he could not prevent it. The rustler shot at him. Lucky he missed."

"But he did miss, eh?"

"Yes, and he wasn't half a dozen yards away."

Blue Pete smiled. "Mebbe he didn' try I'm ridin' on now, Mister Saffron. Them steers'll be over the border I gotta git movin' "

"But—but wait a moment We must make arrangements——"

"Tha're made. I'm stoppen' the rustlin' That's all you want, ain't it? "

CHAPTER VI

CORNERED

HIS confidence weakened as he rode along. To the half-breed Saffron's story of the sudden outbreak of rustling where there had been none for so long painted a complete picture. It meant only one thing—some new arrival, someone who saw in the thinly guarded herds of the prairie near the foothills an easy way to make a living, even a small fortune. Frenchy Thorneau of course. It was exactly the sort of thing Frenchy would undertake, not only to provide a source of income but to keep him busy and provide the excitement his nature craved.

So that the running down of the rustler conveyed to Blue Pete's mind a short road to the man he had come to find. The promise he had given Saffron had meant that and a little more. To have Saffron, the most important rancher in the district, as a friend might some time stand him in good stead. He had even considered as he rode along attaching himself to the Circle K Saffron's ranch, as a puncher in order to cover his operations and to explain his presence in the district.

But thinking it over now, directing the pinto more to the south, he recalled the incident of the previous day. There was Bill Scarway. He, too, was a new-comer and capable of anything. And the Mounted Policeman had informed him that Scarway was a notorious rustler, that his visit to Canada was forced on him by a few score of irate ranchers, sheriffs and cowboys anxious to rid themselves of a persistent pest.

It was not exactly news to the half-breed, he had heard of Scarway before.

Running his mind back over his experiences in Montana, he recalled things he had heard of Scarway, though that outlaw's depredations were at the expense of a more western territory. Only once had they come in contact with each other. Blue Pete, in a burst of reckless hijacking, had travelled west and had single-handedly raided a bunch of Scarway's rustled cows. There had been quite a bit of shooting to mark the occasion, but even at that he had not felt himself in enough danger to shoot to kill. A scar on his ear he had earned from the fray. And now another scar on the same ear from the same source. Scarway himself had been only distantly concerned in the first battle and had failed to recognize him on the previous day.

Now Scarway was in Canada. And Scarway could live nowhere long without running up against the law. Scarway or Thoreau?

He decided it could not be Scarway. That rogue never acted alone, it was his habit to surround himself with followers. His operations were on too large a scale to be carried through by one man. He bulled his way to success.

Frenchy's methods were different. And the rustling Saffron described fitted those methods perfectly. Frenchy preferred to work alone or almost alone. His superior education placed him far above the level of the average Westerner, and in every act that higher level was maintained. If he required assistance he was apt to engage a couple of Indians who would recognize his class and whom he could ignore as companions. It meant rustling on a smaller scale.

At any rate for the present he decided to work on the theory that a search for the rustler would bring

him to the man he sought for Inspector Barker. A few days would prove him right or wrong.

The country grew more broken as he advanced, with a succession of heights and hollows, broken by scattered hills with not infrequent streams flowing eastward and southward from the mountains. The depressions were no longer mere coulees and draws but almost ravines and valleys. A perfect range country, with water and shade and protection. There was little need of riders so long as the cows were left alone.

From what Suffron had told him Blue Pete decided that the more recently stolen cattle could not have gone far. The very luxuriance of the grass and the frequency of water would delay them, and the roughness of the ground would make travel slow, tiring the cattle. It affected something else less encouraging to pursuit: it tended to conceal the trail and render its course erratic.

Frenchy, of course, would make for the border, only beyond the border could he hope to dispose of the rustled cows. And so Blue Pete rode southward, skirting the steeper heights that rose in long waves toward the distant mountains on his right.

He had no wish to visit the valleys thus formed, not at this time. In there were the encampments of the Indians, of Piegans, Bloods, and Blackfeet. Though a Blood reserve was not far distant, many of the tribe preferred to live their lives independent of control, and with the other branches of the Algonquians they had chosen to form their untidy little camps in the valleys of the foothills.

They were no friends of the half-breed, not one of them, he thought, but would like nothing better than to take a pot shot at him if he thought he could do it without bringing on his tracks the Mounted Police.

And the Police had found it conducive to a less disturbed existence for both of them if they kept away from the camps except when law enforcement drove them to pay their infrequent visits. A thousand Blue Petes might be shot there in that tangle of forest, of alternate hill and valley, with no trace for the Mounted Police to uncover.

Valley after valley he glanced into as he rode along. At the moment he had work that took him elsewhere, but he knew that in the not distant future he would know more of those Indians and their encampments. He had no delusions about the danger that would attend his visits. As Mira often declared with a sigh, danger only added zest to his existence.

After a time he shifted his direction more to the south-east forced by the intrusion of steeper heights. By evening he reached the Belly River. This he swam, hanging to Whiskers' tail, his clothes wrapped tightly in a poncho and tied to the saddle horn. During the evening he had twice come close to feeding herds, each tended by watchful cowboys. These he had skirted, ignoring the challenge of the punchers.

As daylight waned a cowboy of another herd, probably rendered suspicious by his indisposition to join them, fired a shot in his direction. Blue Pete's reply was a shot from his .45 into the air. He did not even look around or stop or increase his pace. There was a defiant touch about it. Inaction was making him impatient.

The night was chillier than any he had spent on the trip. The wind did not fall with the sun and the mountains, with their eternal glaciers and the signs of a recent snowstorm on their rocky sides, seemed to send a new chill over the prairie. Besides, his clothes had been dampened a little in the river. But a liltune

of sleeping in the open in all weathers made little of the night.

By the next night, having given the pinto an easy day, he knew he must be near the border. It made him hesitate. He remembered that once, in pursuit of a criminal Inspector Barker wanted, he had followed the trail across into Montana and had brought the fellow back hogtied only to face an almost apoplectic official who promptly and eloquently ordered the man's release. Raw Pete had never been able to understand that. What difference where a criminal was captured? He was wanted—and if you got him to where he was wanted? He always held such hair splitting against the Mounted Police.

But the experience had given him a lesson. A lot of fool rules the Mounted Police had, but they had them and that was all there was to it. A dozen times a day he broke them, but he had learned to conceal the infractions, for his own sake, for the Inspector's, and for the good of law enforcement.

And in this case, he figured, Police rules didn't need to be considered at all.

A night of unbroken sleep brightened the prospect considerably. He would cross the border, at any rate, and have a look about. If he ran across Frenchy he would carefully avoid him. But he would follow him, and Frenchy was certain to return to the Canadian side. If he was rustling he would continue to rustle until he was stopped. Besides, he and Blue Pete had a little thing to settle between them—and he would not be chased out of the country, no, not even by the Mounted Police. That was the sort of chap Frenchy Thoreau was.

Though at no time did he come within sight of the little posts that mark the boundary, the half-breed knew when he had entered Montana. The years he

had spent there had centred about the Badlands that lay further east, but once or twice he had approached the mountains, and a district he had once visited he never forgot.

He commenced then to search for the tracks of a recent movement of cattle. He rode eastward, found nothing and turned back to the west. There, shortly before noon, he found what he sought. It was not good feeding ground and the small herd had been driven hard making for some definite destination. The surrounding country was uninhabited. It was rough and rocky and desolate. At times the trail disappeared but always he picked it up after a search.

Finally it vanished. Where he lost it the trail had tended almost directly to the east. On the right rose a cliff like jumble of rock and rubble. Riding in a wide circle he failed to discover where the cattle had gone, and he returned to the last evidence of it and looked about.

Not far from where he stood a narrow cleft slit the cliff. It was only a few feet wide and he rode to it and looked into it. Then, in some excitement, he continued along the face of the cliff until he found a promising hiding place for Whiskers. There he left her, approaching the cleft once more on foot. For more than a hundred yards he crept into the narrow fissure. It was evident enough that cattle had recently passed. Eagerly but cautiously he advanced. He had his gun in his hand, and he moved with the soundlessness of a wild animal.

Yet he was unprepared for what happened.

At the end of the hundred yards the passage widened, though he could see only a few yards along its winding course. On both sides the cliff rose in jagged steps. It was an ideal spot for an ambush, and he hesitated before stepping out.

It was well he did. From high on the rocky wall to his right a shot rang out. Almost before the bullet flattened against the rock beside him he had pressed himself against the wall and had stooped out of sight of the top of the cliff. He had not brought his rifle, thinking it might impede his progress and the unseen marksman was well beyond the range of his 45.

A second shot rang out, this time from the other wall and behind. Fortunately he had dropped into an angle of the rock, and the bullet went harmlessly past.

But, looking about, he saw that he was cornered. With a rifle before him on one side of the passage, and another behind on the other side, he could not advance or retire.

Even more important, as he saw it, was the fact that he must not be recognised if he could possibly avoid it. Frenchy must not be warned that he was on his trail. That the two marksmen were left as guards of a herd somewhere ahead he felt certain, and Frenchy himself would surely not be one of them. That work he would leave to his assistants. Besides, Frenchy would never have missed such an easy shot. If the half-breed's presence were known Frenchy might not think it necessary to return to Canada to settle their affair—an affair that, in the half-breed's somewhat muddled mind, must be settled in Canada.

Temporarily protected, he tried to work out what he should do.

The situation appeared desperate. For the moment he was safe. But the pair who had tried to kill him were free to move to positions where he would be exposed, the refuge he had found could not protect him for long. And he had no rifle to fight it out with them.

He had seen no one, had, indeed, been conscious of no lurking danger. Yet he upbraided himself for walking into such a trap.

He examined the rock beside him. Over his head it towered almost straight upward for thirty feet. The opposite side was even higher, but it was more broken.

Then he noticed close beside him that the tiny slit into which he had crowded, extended, so far as he could see, to the top. Could he manage to climb it?

At first it looked hopeless, for its sides appeared almost smooth. But as he crowded into it he discovered that it was rougher than he had supposed. Toward the top, too, it widened. It was worth a try, and he lost no time in making the effort.

Quickly he removed boots and socks and strung them about his neck. Packing his bag body into the fissure he found that it scarcely gave him room to move, but he turned sideways and wedging his elbows against the sides, worked himself upward. Using elbows and feet alternately, he advanced a few inches at a time. It tore the skin and brought blood, but he was unaware of it.

He had reached a point half way to the top when the sound of rattling rocks above him made him pause. Someone up there was creeping nearer, hoping to get a shot at him. If he were caught in that position he would be helpless. He set to work frantically. It was a terrific muscular strain, for he could not use his hands, his grip on the rock was maintained only by sheer pressure.

As his head came almost level with the top he stopped. He had no idea where the men were except that one was somewhere near and would be sure to see him the moment his head came over the top. Yet both arms were needed to sustain him, and he could do nothing to protect himself until he was free of the cleft.

Turning his head, he saw to his relief that the fissure widened out suddenly to form a narrow shelf only a

couple of feet from the top. Into this he dropped, so that, with a slight adjustment, he lay almost on his back, holding himself in position easily enough with his feet. It left his arms free. Edging slowly backward, he drew up his feet, preparing to straighten with a spring.

For several seconds he lay resting and rubbing his arms to restore the circulation. All the time he strained for some sound that would locate the man nearest him. But he could hear nothing, and his vision was partly cut off by the position of his knees.

His left hand he slid beneath him. In his right he held the .45. When he rose he knew he would probably be within sight of both foes, but it was the one near who must be put out of the fight first.

With a surge of his powerful muscles he shot upward to his knees, gun pointing.

CHAPTER VII

BUSTLER AGAINST BUSTLER

LUCK was with him—luck, assisted by forethought and preparation for instant action. Not twenty yards away an Indian, rifle in hand, half faced him, preparing to peer over the edge of the cliff. Before the rifle could be raised Blue Pete fired. With a sharp cry the Indian rolled over into the passage out of sight. The thud of his body on the rocky floor echoed from cliff to cliff.

Almost as he fired, the half breed had taken in his surroundings. Behind him the rocky level fell gradually away, and down this slope he crouched as a rifle shot rang out from the opposite cliff. The bullet passed harmlessly over him.

For several moments he lay, collecting his breath and easing his muscles after the strain of the climb. For the time being he was safe, but he had no way of knowing how many others were about or where they were. The sound of the falling body still echoed in his ears, and he shook his head dolefully.

Reckon Frenchy's shy, a Neche puncher. Cudn' take no proper aim, cause I had to shoot quick. Reckon I done fer him shure. He shook his head again, and his thick lips pouted. "Durn glad it's this side o' the border. Th' Inspector'd shure find out ef twasnt. Reckon 'n Indian from the foothills don' matter none down here. Hope Mita don' squeeze it outa me wen I get back. She don' like me hittin' 'em off fer good, she thinks I kin allus peck the spots."

As soon as he was rested he slid on down the slope and presently dropped over to a narrow ledge. There he paused to get his bearings. He was, he discovered, in a curious hollow in the rocky formation. Across the hollow the rock rose again but at a lower level, gradually sloping westward for about a mile to a thickly treed slope. Far beyond loomed the mountains that always made him uncomfortable.

His first thought now that he was temporarily safe from rifle fire was of Whiskers. With enemies so near, had he taken sufficient precautions to conceal her? And if she had heard the shots would her anxiety for him lead her to expose herself? Only under conditions like that could he not trust her to remain where he had left her. At any rate before he did anything more he must make sure of her. Besides, he must get his rifle from the saddle.

Carefully figuring out the direction he examined the ground about him. To work straight toward where he had left the pinto would bring him to exposed elevations. And so he crept down the sloping rock to the west, searching for a lower level that would lead him in the direction he wished to go.

He had come to the conclusion that only two had been left on guard for he had heard only the two rifles, but now after the tumult of the shooting, others might hurry to join the fight. He could not afford to waste time.

But the going was more difficult than it had appeared, for the rocky ground became rougher and heights that he must avoid blocked his way. The sun, too, blazed from a clear sky and the heat rose from the rocks, bringing perspiration pouring from him, sometimes blinding him.

At last driven to recklessness, he decided to make straight for the pinto.

As he passed between two head-high rocks he suddenly pulled up. A faint but familiar odour reached him and he peered ahead around one of the rocks. Only a couple of paces away—he would have stepped on them in another minute—lay a mass of coiled rattlesnakes basking in the sun, their heads rising, their lidless eyes staring straight at him.

It reminded him that he still carried his socks and his boots about his neck and he withdrew, seated himself on the ground and drew them on his bruised and scratched feet. The delay irritated him and for a moment he considered emptying his gun into the snakes, but common sense prevailed and he rounded the rock from the other side and hurried on.

So easily had he judged direction that he came out on the cliff directly over the penit. She had heard him coming and, not knowing who it was, had ranged further out and now stood with packed calves feet braced, prepared to spring away watching the spot where he appeared. He found a break in the wall by which he hunked down to her.

Lots o' fun, ole gal, he murmured. But in the laugh that went with it was more than a little uncertainty and uneasiness. For one thing the dead Indian weighed 1 on 1 m. It was not that he felt any compunctions whatever about shooting an Indian, any Indian, for he hated them, though his mother had been a squaw. But with every fatal shot he thought of the Inspector, Inspector Barker, for some foulish reason was set against killing anyone except as a last resort in self-defence, and Blue Pete was reluctant to admit that he needed to kill to save himself. When one could almost shoot the eye out of a needle there were a bad hundred targets for incapacitating an enemy without taking his life.

"It's jes' plain loco," he grumbled, remembering

the Inspector's obsession. "Anyways I had to shoot quick an' sartin. I hadn't time to aim. Not much anyways," he added doubtfully and a little apologetically.

He stood with foot in stirrup, undecided what to do. There was no thought of flight—he simply had to know what was going on there beyond that passage that guards were set to prevent approach—but what was the best way to set about finding out what he had to know?

There were special difficulties in the way of any normal procedure toward the end he sought. He had to find out if Frenchy was involved; yet he did not wish to be recognized. Frenchy must not know that he was on his trail again, at least not there. Would the Indians have recognized him? He thought not. When he had visited the encampments weeks before he had stained his face a darker hue and had been dressed as an Indian. So long as they did not see his crooked eyes or the scars that marked his face he felt safe from recognition. One Indian, the one who had been nearest, was dead. The other had been too distant to see much.

He tried to recall if he had ever been in the locality before and quickly decided that he had not. But one thing was certain: that narrow passage had been used by the stolen cattle—or by some recent herd—and the herd could not be far away or there would be no reason for the guards. The passage, therefore, must lead to some feeding-ground where the cows could be herded until disposed of. But how to approach it?

Whiskers, of course, must be left behind. But where?

Suddenly from somewhere far along the passage a rifle shot rang out. Blue Pete swung sharply toward it. There was something mysterious about it, for it

had not been fired at him, but was muffled by intervening heights. As he sat listening and wondering a volley of shots cut the silence, interspersed with shouting.

With a sharp dig of his toes into Whiskers' ribs he sent the pinto racing toward the passage. But as he neared it he stopped, leaped from the saddle, took his rifle from the holster, and waved Whiskers away.

"Git off thar," he ordered. "An' watch out fer yerself."

He had looped the reins over the horn, and the pinto wheeled and trotted off.

Blue Pete ran toward the passage. The pinto turned and watched him, sending a low whinny after him as he vanished.

For a few seconds the half breed hurried along the narrow opening. Though he eyed both sides of the cliff, he had little thought that, after all the shooting and excitement he had heard, the guards would have remained where they were placed. Now and then, too, the shooting continued, not in volleys but in single shots—a much more deadly sound. The first volley, he figured, must have been the excited reply to the single shot he had heard first. Now the fight had settled down to a siege, attack and defence from cover. Every shot now had a definite target, with death as the aim.

He came on the body of the Indian he had shot. The poor fellow lay crumpled against one wall, and the half breed tugged it into a more natural position and covered the face with the Indian's neckerchief.

A few minutes later the shooting sounded much nearer. He stopped. It would never do to break on it from the passage. That point would be well covered by one side in the fight or the other. He glanced about. A ledge in the rock to his left caught his eye and with a spring his fingers closed over it and he

drew himself up. Higher and higher he went, and at last found himself on the upper level. Convinced that he was unobserved he ran forward. The cliff, he saw, dropped away a little not far ahead. As he neared it he crouched lower and lower, until at last he advanced flat on his stomach.

When he reached the edge he looked down on a strange unexpected valley. About half a mile in width it was well grassed and watered. Surrounded by the cliff-like wall he could see no other opening but the passage through which the cattle must have entered. Near the other side trees grew along the bank of a stream, and at the edge of the trees a herd of cattle crowded together, plainly alarmed by the shooting but with no open space for a stampede.

Yet, the half-breed knew, there must be another entrance unless the rustlers had unwittingly walked into a trap laid by their enemies.

As he took the scene in, several shots came from the upper end of the valley, and a chorus of shouts succeeded from the same direction. Cowboys, whatever else they were, he would recognize that cry anywhere.

From the opposite end, from a scattered pile of rocks, came answering shots. But no shouting. Then silence.

Suddenly from behind one of the nearer rocks a shot rang out, and a cry of pain came from the other end of the valley.

A flash of movement as someone darted from rock to rock. Other glimpses of running men. They were working down the valley toward the trees. From behind a rock to his right an Indian dashed into view, bent almost double. Another. Along the face of the cliff they continued, protected by the scattered rocks. The leading one disappeared into an opening in the cliff.

As his companions reached it a shot came from near the spot from which he had set out, and the Indian dropped and, after a twitch or two, lay still.

Blue Pete leaned over. The rifle he had heard had made two hits in as many shots. From where he lay the rifleman was plainly in sight. An Indian. But Blue Pete was not deceived. Weeks ago Frenchy Thoreau had made of himself an Indian the Indians failed to recognize.

"Serves 'im right. Blue Pete's eyes brightened. "The dirty skunk! Crawling away. Turnin' tail. Leavin' Frenchy to fight it out alone. But he shud 'a' knowed wet they'd do, he knows the Naches."

Scattered shots came now from across the valley toward the trees. Evidently some of the attacking force were working their way down the side. Blue Pete studied the situation. It looked pretty hopeless for Frenchy, for now he seemed to be alone. Escape was impossible without exposing himself, and a dozen rifles were ready for the attempt. Now and then a reckless cowboy could be seen moving from cover to cover. Twice Thoreau's rifle spoke, and one of the shots was answered by a cry and a cowboy fell into the open and lay still. But he could not hope to hold them off much longer; they were creeping around him. Presently the rock would cease to be a protection.

The attackers continued to shout, more jubilantly now, for they saw they had their victim at their mercy. But Blue Pete knew the battle would be won only at great cost. Frenchy Thoreau would sell his life dearly.

But Frenchy Thoreau must not sell his life to any other rifle than his.

Sliding back out of sight from the valley, he ran toward the passage, dropped into it, and found a break in the opposite face by which he was able to

climb to the other height. It brought him over the spot where Frenchy lay.

As he changed his position he worked out in his mind what had happened. There was little doubt about that. Frenchy had driven the rustled cattle into the valley, planning to keep them there until he found a market for them. His attackers had come on him and the herd. Indignant cowboys? Not at all. The cattle had been stolen in Canada; they did not belong to any avenging or rescuing ranchers. The cowboys were rustlers themselves, seeing an easy way to obtain a herd, stealing from thieves.

With that picture Blue Pete knew what he would do.

CHAPTER VIII

SHOOTING IT OUT

THE upper level on that side of the passage was less suitable for what he had in mind. It was clearer of rubble, and it shelved more steeply toward the valley leaving him more exposed. But he took a chance that the cowboys would be too intent on Frenchy to notice him unless he was careless. Like a snake he glided nearer the edge of the drop.

The shooting continued spasmodically. Thoreau held his fire until he had a definite target and the attackers were more cautious since one of their companions had paid for his rashness.

Blue Pete removed his sombrero, laid it on the ground where it would somewhat resemble a rock, and raised his head behind it. The gang was working its way down into the trees. Once there they would have Thoreau cut off from the exit where one of the Indians seemed to have escaped. To reach the passage through which the cattle had entered was impossible. Fifty yards of open ground would have to be crossed. The attackers across the valley were the most dangerous, and Blue Pete watched them anxiously. Every man in the lot must be an expert shot, only thus could they hope to fit into the life they led.

A shot ripped out suddenly, and a bullet tore through the shoulder of his shirt. He flattened himself. A second bullet struck the rock beside him and went whining away.

Without waiting for more, he slid swiftly backward

up the slope, crept to where the rock was more level, and again moved forward. There he was better protected, and he slid his rifle forward, prepared for action.

A glance below—he was now almost directly above Frenchy—told him that nothing serious had yet happened there. Two bodies lay in sight, and for several seconds not a rustler was visible. Then two shifted their positions so that he could see them sheltered from Frenchy's rifle. He himself could have picked them both off. But as his rifle pointed, a picture of the Inspector's shocked expression rose before him. He thought of a better plan. He knew these men, these rustlers. Daring, yes, reckless when it promised profit, but they could easily be frightened off when the odds were not strongly in their favour.

As yet only one appeared to have spotted him. That rifle he must silence before he dare put into operation the plan he had in mind. He knew exactly where the two shots came from and he kept an eye on the spot. If the man had not moved he was across the valley at the edge of the trees.

From the near side of the valley a cowboy came into sight, running swiftly. Thoreau was unaware of him, in another moment he would be under short-range fire.

Blue Pete lowered his rifle and pulled the trigger. The bullet must have struck the running man's boot, for he uttered a surprised and angry exclamation and darted back, dropping his rifle.

But the hasty shot almost cost Blue Pete his life. From across the valley three rifles roared at him. Instinctively, however, he had provided against that in so far as he was able, for as his own shot rang out he dropped flat against the ground. Even at that

his sombrero was lifted from his head. At the same moment Frenchy fired, and another cowboy fell.

For a time Blue Pete remained on his face, then he dared to raise his head and look over into the valley.

Thoreau had turned on his side and was looking up at him. His rifle jerked upward and pointed. But Blue Pete only waved at him, and Frenchy, with a strange look on his face, turned his attention to more pressing business.

The shot from the unexpected quarter had done its work better than Blue Pete had hoped. The rustlers had had enough. Two were in plain flight, dodging from side to side as they ran. Several others appeared at intervals, moving from cover to cover. Blue Pete sent a shot after them to hasten them. In a few minutes they had disappeared, making for some invisible exit across the valley.

He raised his face and shouted "Yip-ee!"

When he looked about for Frenchy no one was in sight.

He remained for a time where he was, partly to make sure that the rustlers did not reorganize and return, partly because he did not know what was best to do. Thoreau had escaped, where and in what direction he could not tell. Nor could he envisage what he, Thoreau, would do now. That he himself had had at his mercy the man he had come to find did not enter his thoughts. Nor did he remember at the moment that it was only another occasion on which one or the other had come to the other's rescue from what was certain death.

He examined the valley more closely. Three dead rustlers and an Indian lay in plain sight, and he gulped with dismay. But he remembered that the killing

had not occurred where the Mounted Police would concern themselves about it. At any rate four dead rustlers was nothing to agitate the law wherever it occurred. And who was likely to know of this? Four dead? No, five, for back in the passage was a second dead Indian, and he himself was his slayer.

It did not worry him much. No one was likely to know of it. What slight concern he felt was the result of his work with the Mounted Police, it had brought him a new understanding of death, though it never really shocked him except when it came of cruelty or treachery. Death had always been a companion, traveling with him often crowding him—sometimes before his own. As But never had he killed wantonly, needless killing had always angered him. More than once he himself had killed such a killer.

He shook the thoughts from him and rose. His concern now was for Frenchy. What would that cunning fellow do now where would he go? He had no thought that there was danger to himself from Frenchy for the time being. Frenchy was not that sort of a rogue. But, for the same reason, neither could he, Blue Pete, set out to fulfil the promise he had given the Inspector until Frenchy had had time to make a complete escape.

Come to think of it, Frenchy was not the man to think of escape. There below him was a rustled herd, and Frenchy was not apt to give it up without further fighting if fighting was necessary. These cattle he had driven, with the help of some Indians, from the foothill herds, and he would not give them up lightly.

Therein arose a fresh predicament for the half-breed. He had promised Suffron to stop the rustling, and now that he had found it, was he going to have to fight its possession out with Thoreau? Not only did it

mean a battle of wits and guns between them, but something else was involved at this time. Would their fight for the herd mean gun against gun until one or the other was dead? Was that how they were doomed to settle their difference?

The outcome, however it was, offered no satisfaction. In a jumbled indefinite way the delicacy of the problem troubled him. He was bound to get those cattle, but he knew that Frenchy would be driven by a determination as keen. Yet neither at such a time could go to extremes. It was doubly embarrassing to the half breed, for he was unable to work out the etiquette of the situation.

Sworn to shoot at sight, yet it must be under fair conditions. Merely to win was not the point, but to win in such a way as to prove which was the better man with a six-shooter. Neither had an atom of treachery in his make-up. Neither hated the other.

Frenchy would never be frightened off. And there was at least one Indian to help him with the herd.

That thought brought another. How could he hope to possess himself of the cattle without help? The Indians? If only he could come on them before Frenchy, he might cow them into doing what they were told.

He picked his way along the top of the cliff to a point where he found it possible to descend to the valley. Following the course of the Indian who had escaped, he discovered a crack in the surrounding cliff, and he followed it far enough to convince himself that it had provided an exit not only for the Indian but for Thoreau as well.

He returned to the valley and made for the cattle. They were clustered in an open space between the trees and the cliff, and they watched him approach, snorting a little with fear. But he knew cattle, and

after a time he managed to read several of the brands. The Circle R was there, but so were several other brands.

Back along the face of the cliff he slid and, avoiding the slit through which the Indian had escaped, he climbed to the upper level.

CHAPTER IX

CUNNING AGAINST CUNNING

FRENCHY THOREAU scrambled through the narrow slit in the cliff. It rose steeply as he advanced so that by the time he came into the open he was puffing. On his swarthy face was a nasty look that boded ill for anyone who crossed his path.

"The damned rats!" he snarled. "Anyway, I got one of them. I'll get the others some time."

The murderous look vanished and his face twisted to a wry smile. "What a crazy fool he is, that breed! What can one do with a loon like that?"

He chose a retired spot and seated himself to examine his rifle and count his remaining cartridges. But all the time he kept clacking his tongue and frowning.

"What a pair of asses we are! Neither of us going to give up until we have the other, yet all the time we seem only to be able to save each other from certain death. We've each had our chances, but we couldn't shoot. Shoot to kill, eh? When are we going to have a decent chance?"

He sat for a few minutes thinking deeply. At no time had he thought of relinquishing the cattle he had rustled. Had the cowboys not fled he would have remained in the valley to the last cartridge, fighting for the herd, or until a bullet got him. And now that he had come through it unharmed there was nothing to do but to go on with the job, he was not prepared to admit defeat. Indeed, the opposition he had faced

had made him only more determined. If he was unable to carry it through, no one else would, so long as he had a gun and could use it.

It hurt, too, struck at his pride, that he had had to be rescued by a half-breed, and one he had sworn to shoot at sight.

But he could not go on alone. And the only help he could hope for must come from the remaining Indians he had engaged in the foothills. One he had shot while slipping away, and another someone had shot back in the passage. Blue Pete, of course. But there were two other Indians.

A burning fury against them all filled him, yet he could not at the moment afford to punish them for their defection and cowardice. Later he would settle that account.

And so the immediate thought in his mind was to find them and induce—or frighten—them into helping him. The two left would be enough to get the herd to a place where he could dispose of them.

He knew where they had left their horses, and he set out for the spot on the run. But a moment's reflection assured him that there was no hurry. Their mounts could escape only by way of the valley. The Indians would head straight for their ponies, and there they would wait until the way was clear for escape. That would be their one thought now; they would make straight back for Canada at the first opportunity.

He reached the little hollow where they had left the broncos. They were there, just as they were left. But not an Indian was in sight. He was not deceived. They were somewhere near, they would never let their ponies out of their sight. And so he calmly mounted his own bronco and gathered up the reins of the other four.

As he started back toward the valley an Indian head appeared from behind a rock and called to him in Blackfeet. He pulled up and beckoned. The second Indian popped into view, and together the pair came slowly toward him. He never trusted an Indian, but he did not think they could be aware that he had shot one of their companions, for there had been much shooting at the time.

They padded up to him.

"It's all right now," he told them carelessly in their own language.

"White Swan is not here," said one.

That was the Indian Thoreau had shot. "They got him," he said. "But they've gone now. I shot many of them."

He considered it wise that they should not know of the extra rifle that had frightened the attackers off. He held out the reins to them. "We'll have to run the horses back."

One of the Indians accepted the reins of a pony with evident hesitation.

"What of the other who shot so straight back beside the passage?" he inquired.

"He was one of them. I shot him. They're all gone, I tell you," he added impatiently. "It's safe now."

They were not satisfied. When they had joined in the rustling, attracted by the pay and more or less browbeaten into it by Thoreau, they had not figured on being forced to fight for their lives. Thoreau, whom they had accepted as an Indian, had won their admiration from his first appearance among them by his assurance, his daring, and his marksmanship. But with the sound of whistling bullets in their ears everything was changed. They hung back, sullen and defiant.

Thoreau could stand it no longer. He whipped his gun from his belt.

"Get along with it," he ordered. "We won't let those cows escape us now. I tell you it's safe. I'm in just as much danger as you are, more, indeed, and I'm going on with it. And you're coming with me. Understand?"

They understood the gun at least and swiftly gathered up the reins and prepared to mount.

Thoreau, seeing that he had won, altered his tone. "They've cleared out, they won't stop till they get—— Hell!"

He jerked his head back.

It was too late. The loop of a lasso settled over his shoulders, dropped to his elbows, and was jerked taut. His bronco, startled by the movement, jerked forward, and Thoreau was dragged from the saddle, landing on his head.

The Indians dropped the reins they held and turned to run.

"Better stay where you are," ordered a voice in their own language from above their heads, and a bullet crashed into the rock between them. "You're not going to be hurt if you don't run."

They raised their eyes. A great hulk of a half-breed came clambering down the side of the cliff, hauling in the rope as he came. But Thoreau was in no condition to resist, the fall had knocked him out.

One of the Indians uttered a sharp exclamation.

Blue Pete grinned. "Recognize me, eh? Yes, I'm Thunder Face. And now you know I'm no Indian. But, Leaping Rabbit, I did something for you once, now you're going to do something for me."

As he descended, his crooked eyes kept all three in view. Dropping to his knees beside Thoreau, he

charmed him. Then he tied his arms to his body, leaving him helpless.

He had barely finished when the bound man's eyes opened. Blue Pete smiled down on him.

"Keep on actin' an' lookin' like 'o Injun," he advised in English. "I'm not goin' to give yuh 'way, Frenchy. Sorry we gotta call off our h'l game fer a while longer, but I reckon twont make no difference w'en the time comes we kin start playin' it ag'in."

Thorau made a wry face. "You've certainly had me under your gun, Pete. I must be off my feed to-day."

"Shore hard luck," agreed the half-breed.

"It's hard luck that I had to be pulled from a mess by you. Now what are you going to do with me?"

Blue Pete stood looking down on him, scratching his thick black hair. "Reckon that's the question. Don' know wot to do. Yuh're share in the road. Can't see nothin' to do but hang ontuh yuh fer a while. Ef yuh——"

He flashed about, gun pointing, and a shot rang out. One of the Indians who had darted away dropped and lay still.

Thorau made a sound of disgust. "You needn't have done that. He hasn't done anything to you."

"Badgerin'," sneered the half-breed. "Get up, you," he ordered in Blackfeet, "or I'll give you something to lie down about."

The Indian scrambled to his feet and returned with a sheepishly downcast face. With a grunt that might have been apology, he lined up beside Leaping Rabbit. The latter showed no disposition to resist. There had been a time when he had it in mind to shoot the half-breed, but that was weeks before when Blue Pete, disguised as an Indian, had lived in his tepee for a day or two with him and his young squaw. And the squaw had looked on their guest with such

kindness that her spouse had murder in mind. Blue Pete's open scorn for her and his flight from the camp had altered the situation entirely, and all Leaping Rabbit remembered was that the half-breed had carried him for miles when his horse had thrown him and broken his ankle.¹

"Hada'n't we better go into conference together as to how to dispose of me?" teased Thoreau.

Blue Pete scowled. "Durn yuh, don' crowd me. I kin 'take yuh long till I work out wot to do with yuh." He turned to the Indians and spoke in their own language. "Lift Round Owl to the saddle." Round Owl was the name Thoreau passed under since disguising himself as an Indian.

The Indians obeyed. Then they hobbled the bronco's front feet, and with Blue Pete mounted on one of the Broncos that had been owned by a dead Indian they moved out into the valley.

The cattle had recovered from the alarm caused by the shooting and were contentedly feeding. Blue Pete looked them over. To his surprise he read the brands of Montana ranches with which he was more or less familiar.

Thoreau read the surprise in his face and laughed. "You should know by this time, Pete, that Frenchy Thoreau is no respecter of persons. In this game a cow's a cow as you knew well when you were in it yourself. There's no reason why I should favour Canada."

It was a choice selection of cows, and the half-breed's eyes brightened as he looked them over. Thoreau smiled.

"It's much too bad, Pete, much too bad that we can't get together. There's a killing to be made from those herds out from the foothills. It's the easiest

¹ *Blue Pete Rebel.*

game I ever played. It'll be easier now that we've given those damned thieves a lesson. With your gun and mine we can fight our way through anything they can put up against us."

He noticed the twist at the corners of Blue Pete's lips.

"Well, they *are* thieves. I work for my cows. Let them do their own rustling. I face all the danger, do all the work, drive them for days, and then they think to gather them in and sell them for themselves. What do you say, Pete? I know half a dozen ranchers down here who'll take all we can bring down. Cash in our hands. If you'd only—— Oh, hell, what's the use?"

For Blue Pete had turned away to give orders to the Indians.

On his orders they rounded up the herd in the open heart of the valley. That completed, Blue Pete turned once more to Thorcau.

"You 'n' me's ridin' over this way a bit, Frenchy." He took hold of the rein of the other bronco, and they went in among the scattered rocks at the base of the cliff. There Thorcau was dragged from the saddle and his legs bound together.

Thorcau watched every move, a broad smile on his round face.

"What a topsy-turvy world it is, Pete! I get a fine fat herd down here, all ready to pocket the winnings. A gang intervenes for easier winnings. You butt in and drive them off—why, I can't imagine, unless it's pure cussedness. But just when it looks as if things are more topsy-turvy than ever, you show you're human and avaricious like the rest of us. Well, you've earned it. It's a nice fat killing, that herd, and you've taken it over all alone, the sort of stuff that interests me, even at my own expense. But," he added grimly, "some day you'll settle for this, too."

You know damned well that some day I'll run you down and get even. If you're not afraid I challenge you to carry the winnings with you. That's a sporting proposition—carry them for a month only. If I fail to get you in that time you can keep everything. But I'll get you—oh, yes, I'll get you."

Blue Pete heard him through in silence, his dark face expressionless as an Indian's. At the end he thrust out his tongue and turned away.

Thorau stared after him with wide, concerned eyes. "Look here, you don't mean you're leaving me here, hog-tied like this, to starve to death, or to be eaten by wolves or coyotes? Why don't you put a bullet in me right now? And if the coyotes hold off, the sun will do as much for me. You know I can't wriggle from ropes you tie, you damned murderer."

Blue Pete walked around him, examining the ropes. "Yuh know darn well I ain't gittin' yuh outa that mess with the cowboy's job to le've yuh to kick out in a rope. Yuh know that ain't how we're settlin' things. No, sir-ee. I'm givin' yuh a chance. I wanta git yuh fair, an' I'm goin' to."

He picked Thorau up in his brawny arms and carried him nearer the cliff. There he laid him down where the shadow of the cliff would protect him from the sun.

"No," he said, "yuh can't untie them ropes, but ef yuh ain't got gumption 'nuff to git outa any ropes in a coupla hours with all these sharp rocks about, then yuh ain't worth chasin' like I bin chasin' yuh. Hah! I'd be outa them ropes so quick I'd meet you comin' outa this place. That's why I'm takin' yer cayuse. I got work 'nuff to do with them cows, 'thout you buttin' in. Yuh gotta toddle fer it on yer own feet. . . . Winnin's? Reckon I'm winnin's 'nuff fer yuh, Frenchy. But wot yuh find on me's yours—w'en

yuh find it I'll be back in Canady, lookin' fer yuh—ef yuh're not too skeered to come shootin' "

Thoreau's face darkened. "Wherever you are you know I'll be. But why not stick around here? Shootin' isn't such a crime on this side of the border "

"T 'ud be wuss with me, Frenchy. I ain't got much more room on mah .45 fer fresh mucks. Wich 'runds me " He drew his gun and a large knife and cut two nicks in the grip. "Thar ain't too much room fer more 'bout throwin' it outa balance. Thanks fer the Neckies."

He rode away, untied the hobbles from Thoreau's bronco, and led it to where the Indians awaited him. They had made no move to escape, probably because they were under his eye and his rifle was too handy.

Thoreau called after him. "You left me as an Indian, Pete. Thanks. I'll do as much for you some time, even if you are a Mounted Police stool pigeon."

CHAPTER X

A TROUBLESOME TASK

BLUE PETE swung angrily about, his face dark and threatening. But Thorrau only laughed.

It was the first time anyone had openly suspected him of working in with the Mounted Police since those earlier Jays, though his numerous enemies had accused him—behind his back, of course—of every crime they could think of. His connection with the Mounted Police was carefully guarded by the few who knew of it. Indeed apart from the Police themselves in the Medicine Hat detachment no one but Mica was aware of it. Enigma that he was to everyone in the Medicine Hat district, his record of lawlessness, the years he had been engaged in rustling on both sides of The border, and his wandering, wild life protected him effectively from any serious accusation of association with the forces of the law.

More than once he had appeared as the enemy of rustlers, had saved many a rancher from loss, but that side of his operations was ascribed to his love of excitement and danger. Indeed, the ranchers, deep in their hearts were convinced that he did a bit of rustling himself.

Further to protect him from suspicion, his infrequent meetings with Inspector Barker, wherever they touched the public, were surrounded by an atmosphere of suspicion amounting to hostility.

And now to be called a Mounted Police stool-pigeon seemed to tear aside the veil behind which he had

always operated. And "stool-pigeon"! With difficulty he restrained himself.

For a few minutes he conferred with the Indians. Was there not some other exit from the valley, some passage easier and less dangerous for getting the cattle away? There was. It was on the opposite side, as he suspected, where the cowboy rustlers had made their escape.

Thorau had rolled out from behind the rock where he had been left. He lay watching every move, a curious smile on his face. The charge he had thrown at the half breed had come to his lips without much thought, a casual stab that was based only vaguely on the fact that Blue Pete as well as the Mounted Police, were after him. And the half breed had, he knew, exposed his attempt to escape pursuit by feigning to have been drowned. To that extent Blue Pete had assisted the Police. But something in the flame of anger that had blazed in the face of the accused interested him.

In a moment or two however, he forgot it. He wondered what it was Blue Pete discussed with the Indians. He wondered how he had so easily secured the assistance of the Indians, for it had not been entirely through fear.

The matter of another exit settled, the Indians were concerned about what was to happen to them. Thorau had promised them a definite amount and now they saw all their work, and the danger they had so narrowly escaped, going for nothing. They sulked.

Blue Pete understood. He enquired what Thorau had promised them, and he assured them he would reward them no less liberally. They believed him. Was he not getting a fine herd without expense and with little trouble? He could afford to pay well, for he could do little without their help.

That too, he read in their minds. He had no doubts about their capacity for treachery, but he hoped that his promises might keep them faithful. If not, then he was prepared to force obedience. He had, however, another dilemma which he dare not discuss with them. That they would learn in due time.

The Indians appeared to know the district well. But could they lead him safely from the valley? The immediate danger lay in the fact that the exit he planned to use might furnish ambush for the defeated rustlers. With only two assistants he could not hope to clear the way against opposition and drive the herd through. So that for a time he considered using the other exit. But when chancing to turn he saw Thoreau watching him, he gave the word to go on.

The new passage was much wider than the one by which he had come. Rugged heights rose on either side, but they were less precipitous and more broken. In that respect they offered better hiding places for attack. But the length of the passage was much shorter.

Leaving the Indians to keep the herd moving, he climbed to the height on one side, carrying his rifle. From there he hoped to be able to protect the herd from attack. For a time nothing happened.

Wormes paled over him. Whiskers would be waiting for him, and he had no idea when he would be able to pack her up, perhaps not for a couple of days. Absorbed in the thought, he became careless. At a point where the Indians were hidden from him, one of them turned back.

To Blue Pete's ears came the rush of pounding hoofs, then a loud familiar whinnying. He rushed to a point where he could look down on the passage. Whiskers was there, standing broadside, whinnying

her loudest. She had blocked the way before the retiring Indian and was calling to her master a warning. The Indian, seeing himself balked and hearing Blue Pete shout, reached for the pinto's rein, as if all the time he had nothing else in mind.

With a grip Blue Pete turned and scrambled along above the herd.

They were not waylaid. The gang, it appeared, had been thoroughly frightened and had been glad to escape. Presently the cows emerged into open country. Blue Pete climbed down and mounted the pinto. The Indians had gone ahead, driving the cattle before them. The half-breed overtook them. He directed them to the east. Leaping Rabbit protested. Their market was south, straight south. Blue Pete insisted. They were forced to obey, but they eyed each other questioningly.

On the northern side of the herd rode the half-breed, carefully examining the rough country on his left. There would probably be trouble when the Indians discovered what he had in mind, but his contempt for them was too deep to permit that trouble to appear serious. Far ahead he could see that the heights to the north dropped away into country somewhat resembling the prairie east of the foothills.

Darkness was falling when he gave the order to turn northward. Leaping Rabbit regarded him doubtfully. The other Indian was sullen.

"You know another place to sell the cows?" asked Leaping Rabbit.

"I'm taking them where we can get rid of them," Blue Pete replied shortly.

Far into the night they continued, but when at last they reached a promising feeding-ground they had not advanced many miles. A whole day's travel with a herd, even under favourable conditions, is seldom

more than twenty miles, and the drive had not commenced until late in the afternoon.

Throughout the night Blue Pete dare not sleep. He did not trust the Indians, and he saw that they were puzzled and uneasy. Just before daylight Leaping Rabbit came to him.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

It was useless to delay. "To Canada," said Blue Pete.

Leaping Rabbit stared. "But—but it won't be safe to try to sell the cows there."

"What I'm going to do is the safest thing to do—for all of us," replied the half-breed. "I've told you you'll be paid. That's all you need worry about. I know where I can get rid of the cows. I haven't rustled all these years without knowing my business. All you have to do is what I tell you to do."

CHAPTER XI

FRENCHY GETS A HORSE

AS long as the three riders were in sight Frenchy Thoreau had not missed a move. All the while his mind was actively at work. No sense of defeat weighed him down, no picture of the hopelessness of his position. Rustling was bound to have its ups and downs, and he was prepared for them. Besides, he was not prepared to believe that he had seen the last of the cows he had worked so hard to steal. Even if they were out of his hands for ever there was no keen feeling of loss, his renewed outburst of rustling had been undertaken with less thought of gain than of relieving the monotony of his existence with the Indians while avoiding the Mounted Police.

He felt no hatred for Blue Pete. Though he had warned him that he would get even there was no thought of revenge, except as a sop to his pride. All his rivalry with the half-breed arose from the very condition that had induced him to accept without question the challenge to shoot at sight, he was not satisfied that the half-breed was the better man with a gun, and he wished to know.

Toward the Indians he felt different. For cowards he had nothing but loathing and contempt, and that their cowardice had been exhibited at his expense provided only a more definite goal for his anger. Some day they would pay for it.

He had no fear for himself. As Blue Pete had said, if he could not in time free himself from the ropes that

bound him he was not worth chasing. Many a time he had been in tighter straits and had always managed to pull through. As with the one who had come on his trail, difficulty and danger only added to the zest of facing them. He could not hope to untie the knots that held him, but ropes could be severed, and lying scattered about him were the means.

Selecting a rock with a sharp edge within reach, and large enough to withstand the pressure he would bring on it, he rolled against it and set to work to saw himself free.

It was not a simple task, for his hands were tied behind his back. It meant that care rather than speed was wise if he hoped to escape without lacerated wrists.

As he worked he kept alert to everything about him. He was not satisfied that the rustlers might not return. Temporarily frightened off by the death of some of their gang, they would gather more to their aid and return, set on revenge. The very nature of their work called for recklessness and dogged resistance—or revenge. To danger they had been born, and only a hic of danger would satisfy them. That they had fled so precipitately was explained by the mystery of their unseen foe: they knew neither who nor how many had entered the battle.

As he worked at his bonds he listened. He saw Whiskers scurry into the valley from the passage through which he had brought the cows, look eagerly about, and tear away toward the other entrance. He had seen the pinto many times before in and about Medicine Hat, and he laughed as the ugly, spotted little animal dashed through.

He let his mind reach ahead. The herd could not be driven at any great speed. If only he could lay his

hands on a horse he could cover in a day what the herd would travel in four. And the nearest rancher who would take the risk of buying rustled stock was several herd distances to the south-east. Besides, they would deal warily with a stranger.

It was dark before he succeeded in freeing his hands. And as Blue Pete had taken his knife it was many minutes more before his legs were free.

Carefully saving the rope for future use, he started off in the darkness to see what the bodies of the three dead rustlers had to offer. One by one he searched them, but Blue Pete had been there before him, their guns and knives were gone. Disgusted even indignant, he hurried along the course the herd had taken.

He had scarcely entered the passage when he became aware that something that called for caution lay ahead. A couple of rabbits leaped frantically past paying little heed to him, making for the valley he had left. Something or someone was there behind them. Perhaps a larger animal, a coyote, but he would take no chance. And so he withdrew among the rocks and climbed carefully to a higher level.

It was a bright night, and he crouched where the passage was under his eyes. Only a few minutes passed before a man came creeping along beneath him, gliding from cover to cover. He carried a rifle. Behind came two more, then another pair.

Thorau waited for nothing more. The gang had returned determined on revenge and to carry through their plan of taking the herd by force. Climbing higher, he hurried forward.

One thing seemed certain, the gang had no idea that the herd had already escaped from the valley. It puzzled him. They had probably been too far away to see it as it left, and in the darkness they had

failed to notice evidence of its passing. Now they hoped to effect a surprise.

Curious, he turned back and watched. His conclusions were supported by the fact that the men did not pass directly through to the valley, but as they neared it climbed to the higher rocks on the other side of the passage and went out of sight toward the western end of the valley. There they would come out over the trees. Two remained, however, though he could not see where they had taken cover.

Suddenly his heart gave a leap. Someone was approaching, making directly for him. He waited, cowering in the shadow of a rock, a plan forming in his mind. The man came on. Four or five paces away he stopped.

Thoreau could not wait. With a leap he was on his man, his fingers closing about his throat. The rifle he carried clattered to the ground. A knee raised viciously and caught him in the groin.

The pair somewhere across the passage heard the sound of the struggle. Dully they could see it. They hesitated. And while they hesitated the struggling pair disappeared. Thoreau had whisked the helpless cowboy behind a rock. Thoroughly roused by that time, the pair started to clamber down across the passage to see what had happened.

A shot rang out, and one of them uttered a cry and fell, clawing at his throat. The other drove out of sight. One more shot Thoreau sent in that direction, then he crept away.

He laughed to himself. He had a rifle now, and two revolvers with ample ammunition. And a pair of dead rustlers wiped out the memory of the narrow escape he had had. All he needed now was a horse. Straightway he set about acquiring one.

In that country no one moved without a mount. The horses of the rustlers must be near by. As he hurried forward by the sounds he knew that others of the gang were rushing to the alarm of the shots. Where the cliff dropped away to the more level country beyond, he carefully climbed down.

A young moon and a starlit night furnished all the light he needed. Yes, out there a few hundred yards from the entrance to the passage loomed a dark group—the horses, of course. But they would never be left unguarded. Success for what he had in mind depended on the number of guards and on their alertness, though he did not question for a moment that he would get what he wanted.

From his belt he drew one of the revolvers and holding it behind his back, openly advanced. The guard—there was only one—saw him and called to him. With a smile Thoreau saw that his manoeuvre had succeeded: the guard took him for one of his companions. But the shooting had alarmed him, for he held his rifle ready in his hands. As Thoreau approached, however, at such a leisurely pace, the rifle was returned to its holster.

"What's goin' on in there?" enquired the guard in a low voice. "Have you got them?"

Thoreau waved an arm but did not speak. He chuckled audibly. It must have satisfied the guard for he, too, laughed.

And then Thoreau's other hand came up. It pointed a gun.

"Not all of them, my man," he jeered. "In fact, not one of them. I'm the one you want most, and I'm here. And if you make a move you won't be—not alive, at any rate."

He strode nearer. The guard's hands lifted. "My God!"

Thoreau shifted his gun to his left hand. His right shot out. The guard grunted and toppled from the saddle.

With a low laugh Thoreau tore his cartridge belt from him and, running an expert eye over the horses, selected one and vaulted into the saddle. The others he started in a wild stampede. Then he galloped away.

CHAPTER XII

TWO AGAINST MANY

IN the meantime Blue Pete had already realized some of the troubles he had anticipated. The spare horses he turned loose. As he expected they joined the herd as part of it. He had no treasings about the task he had set himself. A certain amount of trust he felt he could put in Leaping Rabbit. The other Indian, he sensed, could be kept in order by bullying. To accomplish that several subtle means were open to him. Years before when he lived with the Indians, he had learned how to handle them besides, the instinct was in his blood. Yet there were times when he recognized the fact that his white blood handicapped him; he could not always be certain that he knew what was in the Indian mind.

There was Thorau, too, to consider. He knew Frenchy well enough to feel certain that he would not long remain bound. And Thorau's first thought when freed would be to recover what he had lost, if only to soothe his pride. To head Blue Pete off would, to him, be more important than anything he could do to the rustlers.

And so the half-breed had pushed the herd forward far into the night. With only two assistants, too, and with some rest necessary, the wearier the cattle were, the easier they would be to handle.

He dare not sleep, and he had had a long tiring day. The cows, however, gave no trouble, content only to feed, drink, and rest. But hour after hour he curled them, always checking up on the Indians at unexpected

intervals. Since the incident when Whiskers had blocked the flight of Leaping Rabbit's companion, there had been no sign of another attempt to escape. The two Indians maintained the places assigned to them, snatching sleep in the saddle.

With daylight Blue Pete saw that he must be near the border. Travel in the morning was difficult on account of rough ground and food and water were scarce so that the cattle hurried forward in watch of both. Not far across the border, he remembered, they would come on the Belly River and unless some simpler crossing than the one he had found was known to the Indians they would have trouble with the herd.

That trouble Leaping Rabbit solved in advance by urging a more westerly course. It would bring them to the upper reaches of the river.

But it also kept them south of the border and for a reason he did not stop to analyse Blue Pete did not feel comfortable about it.

At noon they stopped beside a stream. The route had become so rough that they made slow progress, picking their way over the broken ground, winding among rocky elevations and unfertile depressions. The sun had gone behind a cloud and a chill wind commenced to blow from the mountains. Snow had fallen during the night on the distant peaks and a general air of chill depression settled over the country. The cattle too were restless and Blue Pete, examining the sky, was doubtful about the weather. And so, despite the delay it forced on them, he decided to remain over night where they were awaiting the threatened storm. They had found feed and water, and after the difficult trail without either the cattle might be more content.

It meant another sleepless night, and it did not improve the half-breed's temper. Since the Indians

gave no cause for expending his ill-humour on them, it centred on the herd. The effect was not long in exhibiting itself.

Ceaselessly once more he rode the rounds through the night. He had a feeling that something worse even than a threatened stampede overhung him, and he began to regret that he had accepted Leaping Rabbit's route. Across the border in Canada he would have felt less uncomfortable. To be sure the Indians had shown no sign of defection since the previous day. Indeed the nearer they approached the Canadian side of the border, the more eager they showed themselves to assist. But that did little to soothe the half-breed's uneasiness. They were frightened at what they had done—that was all. They may even have had their doubts about the half-breed, fearing that he might hand them over to the Mounted Police. Their zeal, he knew, was in consideration only of their own skins.

The night wore on. The storm held off but the threat of it increased with the delay. As one waits for the explosion from a pointed gun Blue Pete found himself waiting for a crash of thunder. An electric tension was in the air, it acted on man and beast. Even Whiskers was nervous, snorting with terror at the slightest sound and crowding away from the cattle at every loosening of the reins.

Once Blue Pete jerked her up impatiently. "Dang yuh, ole gal, ef you know wot's comin' w'y donchu tell me wot 'tis?"

It happened when the night had worn well away. A faint glow had already appeared in the eastern sky. With the coming of day a stampede would be less likely and more simple to handle.

Pinto and rider were moving along at the time well toward the northern edge of the herd, on a slope across

a stream along which the herd had been rounded up. The night still lay deeply about them, with heavy clouds through which came faintly on the upper levels the eastern light. Down in the hollow beside the stream the air was cold and damp. It had driven the Indians to the higher side of the slope.

As Blue Pete finished speaking, the pinto suddenly stopped, and her head jerked up. The reins were loose, and she wheeled and faced across the herd to the south. The half-breed knew what it meant, and he leaned forward to feel her ears stiffly pointed forward.

"Wot is it, ole gal?" he murmured.

Whisker's reply was a low snort.

Quietly swinging her about he started away at right angles to the herd. In a few moments he almost rode into Leaping Rabbit. A swift, low-voiced order sent the Indian racing away into the darkness, rounding the herd to the north. Blue Pete turned aside, rode for a distance directly away from the herd, then, out of hearing, tore around and made toward the south.

He could see or hear nothing alarming, though ears and eyes were keen as an animal's, but he had faith in Whiskers. A slight rise in the ground cut him off from the cattle. The first rumble of thunder broke from the west. Was it that the pinto had heard? But no, she had faced directly south. Besides, he had a feeling.

He had turned inward along the south side of the herd when a shot crashed through the tense stillness that succeeded the thunder. With a tightening of his knees he sent the pinto dashing toward the sound. He had no hope of preventing a stampede, but he must know what that shot meant. Thunder and rifle shots would send the cattle wild and he could only hope the Indians would keep out of their way.

He heard them commence their charge through the darkness in the blind race that wrought such toil from man and beast. He thought of shouting to the Indians to let them go, since they were headed in the right direction, but he did not wish his whereabouts to be known. He had drawn the pinto down to a walk, listening with all his ears.

He seized his rifle. His teeth ground together. Had it not been for that shot they might have managed to control the cattle. Who had fired it, and at what?

He knew almost as the question flashed into his mind. From the darkness came a taunting laugh—a second shot.

He knew that laugh. Frenchy Thoreau!

For a time he sat peering into the darkness in the direction from which the laughter had come. A flash of lightning lit the scene. Away to his right the herd poured like a coloured stream over the ridge. And on its western flank Frenchy Thoreau loped slowly along, firing his gun.

But in one thing he had made a mistake. attacking from the south, he had started the herd northward, and now nothing could stop them or divert them. In that direction they would soon cross the border into Canada.

Blue Pete leaned forward over the horn of the saddle. "Yuh gotta do it ole gal," he snarled.

The pinto leaped ahead in headlong flight. The roar of thunder burst over their heads as they sped along, and the first drops of rain beat on them, seeming to drive almost into the flesh. It was a dangerous pace in the darkness, but neither rider nor mount seemed to have any fear.

Another vivid flash. They were among rocks, and the half-breed slowed down a little. The cattle had disappeared. So had Thoreau. The Indians he had

completely forgotten. He drew in and sat, head bent into the rain, trying to think what to do next.

Every instinct was to concentrate on Thoreau. Now they were free to shoot it out, for at that moment neither owed the other anything—anything, that is, but the settlement of their feud. But his mind turned aside for a moment toward the stampeding cattle. He had promised Suffron, and they were his first care. Perhaps the Indians were riding beside them now, trying to head them off, crowding them into a mauling mass, the one method of stopping a stampede.

But Thoreau's taunting laugh rang in his ears. And he was only a half breed.

Lighted by another flash, he rode in among the rocks and dismounted. Frenchy, he felt certain, was not far away. Somewhere among the rocks he lay in hiding, chuckling over his triumph. The thought of it brought a wave of reckless fury over the half-breed. The lightning showed him that he had chosen good cover for himself and the pinto, and he ordered her to lie down.

In a few minutes daylight would be on them, certainly light enough to make something more than a gamble of the duel he foresaw. Patiently he waited, listening for any sound that might betray Frenchy's whereabouts.

Then the thunder ceased, the rain became a faint drizzle and passed. It moved to the south-east, leaving only faint flashes of lightning.

Still he waited. He had learned to trust the instinct that warned him of the presence of an enemy, and he was very conscious of it now. Frenchy was somewhere still within rifle range. The cows were now gone beyond control: there remained only the man whose account had some day to be settled. And Frenchy, with all the patient cunning of his Indian blood, would

not be taken by surprise, even had the half-breed wished it. He, too, knew what lay before them that somewhere near Blue Pete lay waiting for him to expose himself.

With daylight the half-breed satisfied himself that he had chosen his position well. All about huge rocks were scattered. But as they furnished cover for him so they did for Frenchy, and they limited his view.

Minutes passed - fifteen of them - a half hour. His patience wore thin. seldom had he been driven to take cover from a single enemy. But he knew that to reveal himself when he was uncertain of where Frenchy was would be foolhardy and promised nothing but a bullet from a gun that seldom failed to reach its mark.

The minutes flew past. Now and then he risked a glance over the top of the rock behind which he had taken shelter. That Frenchy was not very near he read from Whiskers' indifference. The pinto lay quietly watching him from behind another rock. An hour passed.

He commenced to boil with impatience. It hurt his pride that any man should be able to keep him under cover so long, helpless and uncertain. With some thought of risking a dash into the open or over a ridge to his right he studied the ground about him. If he could reach that height he might be able to see where Thorau had concealed himself.

He rose, keeping himself covered by the rock. The pinto welcomed the movement with a twitch of her tail. Blue Pete shook his head.

"Shure yuh don' like this no more n' I do, ole gal," he murmured. "Taun't often nobody kin do this to us, an' it don' go down nobow. Wot say fer a run fer it?"

Whiskers' scraggy tail expressed her delight at the prospect. She had changed sides twice already, taking

care not to damage the saddle. Now she raised her head, waiting for the word to rise.

"Jes' yuh say, ole gal."

He raised his head over the rock that he might have a wider field of vision. At that instant, from behind a rock more than a hundred yards away, Thoreau did the same. Each saw the other and ducked.

"Yip-ee!" shrieked the half-breed defiantly.

"Yah hoo!" came the equally defiant reply.

"Reckon we'll jes' stick whar we are, ole gal," Blue Pete decided.

Then something else happened. From the south came the thunder of hoofs, the wild shouts of charging men. Without waiting for orders Whiskers came to her feet. A single glance the half-breed threw toward the oncoming riders, then he was in the saddle. Flight, while the way was still open toward Canada, was the only sensible course to follow.

Frenchy Thoreau had come to the same conclusion, for as Whiskers dived through the scattered rocks, Thoreau dashed into view on a parallel course. He carried his rifle, and his eyes were fixed on the attackers behind him.

A volley of bullets came whistling about them. But the range was still long, and the pace was fast, so that neither was hit.

Blue Pete was little concerned. He knew that in a few minutes Whiskers' speed would carry her beyond effective range. He glanced across at Thoreau. His horse, too, appeared to be holding her own. And their mounts must be fresher than those behind them. But there were two dangers: a stray bullet might injure a bronco, or at such a speed on such rough ground one of them might stumble.

Thoreau was alive to the danger, for he looped the reins over the saddle horn, gathered up his rifle to

the ready, and pulled the trigger. It was almost a luck shot, twisted as he was in the saddle, but one of the pursuing broncos stumbled and fell.

It failed however to stop the chase. Rather, it seemed to make riders behind more determined, more furious. A second volley spat at them.

Blue Pete glancing across at Thoreau saw his bronco go suddenly lame. It must have stepped on a rolling stone or been hit. In a few steps it stopped. Thoreau leaped from the saddle, drew his revolver and sent a bullet crashing into its head. Dropping behind it, he prepared to sell his life dearly.

The ground they had reached was more open with little semblance of a cover. At the best Thoreau might bring down three or four of the band. In the end they were certain to get him. As he dropped they scattered, working around from both sides. There were coulers about and they could keep out of danger and work in from the rear.

Just ahead the ground fell away a little. Blue Pete made up his mind quickly. As the pinto tore into the depression he stopped her, ordered her to lie down, and threw himself flat on the ground rifle pointing at the oncoming cowboys. Two bullets met them. Two broncos fell their riders rolling to cover behind them. A third shot caught a rider in the arm, and he tumbled from the saddle, his mount continuing without hesitation.

The pair who had taken cover behind their dead broncos, seeing their companion wounded, decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Under cover of the broncos and the curve of the ground they crept back out of sight. Four remained and before either Thoreau or Blue Pete could head them off they disappeared into a coulee.

At a word Whiskers was on her feet. As he mounted,

Blue Pete unlooped his lasso. The bronco of the wounded cowboy came racing nearer. The loop swung out and dropped over its neck. It was a trained cow-pony, and at the feel of the rope it stopped with braced feet. It knew that to continue meant a painful tumble.

A bullet whistled too close to the half-breed's head for comfort. The cowboys were shooting from cover. A second shot sent Thoreau edging further around the dead bronco.

Trailing the captured bronco behind him and risking the bullets that flew about him, Blue Pete raced across to where Thoreau lay. The latter saw him coming and covered him with his rifle. Then he laughed.

"Yah-hoo!" he cried, leaping up and seizing the rein of the captured bronco. "We'll take on the whole damned country," he exulted, as he vaulted into the saddle.

"Reckon yuh'll hev 'nuff to do to take me on w'en the time comes," said Blue Pete dryly.

They raced away together. Thoreau laughed. "This is getting fantastic, Pete. Is it never going to be the place and the time? But the challenge holds, doesn't it? And may the best man win when we start shooting."

"Hub!" grunted the half-breed. "I am' goin' to let no darn stranger git yuh from me, Frenchy. Yuh bet it holds."

CHAPTER XIII

FRIENDLY ENEMIES

THEY rode then in silence, except for a chuckle that broke now and then from Thoreau. It irritated the half-breed. Something about it reminded him of the strange fate that led them across each other's paths. And on each occasion he had felt foolish about it. Here he was, riding along in outward amity with a man whose criminal career he had promised Inspector Barker to end. Almost a dozen times one or the other had had the other helpless under his gun, yet neither had been able to shoot. Both fully armed, both lightning on the draw and unusual marksmen, yet they rode now side by side in flight from a common foe?

And Thoreau found something about it to laugh at. It was no joke to Blue Pete.

It embarrassed him, and embarrassment always made him short-tempered. How and when, he asked himself, were they ever going to be able to fight the thing out? Thoreau might swing off now and disappear for good, yet both knew that neither would shoot. The cowboys had evidently had enough, for they did not continue the chase.

Blue Pete began to wish his unwelcome companion would go, but instead he continued at his side. Together they crossed the border. They were riding slightly to the west of north. Unconsciously Blue Pete had picked up the trail of the stampeding cows and was following it. But Thoreau, too, followed it. What, then, did he plan to do?

The half-breed's irritation burst into voice:

"Damn yuh, Frenchy wot yuh gaddin' at? An' whar yuh goin'? Wot yuh think yuh're goin' to do? Ther ain't no sense comin' 'long with me I ain't useta——"

A burst of laughter stopped him, and he scowled his resentment.

"I wisht them skunks 'ud git after us ag'in," he growled.

Thoreau continued to laugh. "And if they did, Pete, and you saw me in trouble, you'd risk your life to get me out of it. You know you would."

"Shure I want yuh——"

"Yes, I know I know. You want me for yourself. You wouldn't sleep if some day we didn't have this thing out with guns blazing. On the record you've got the best of it. You always beat me at target-shooting, and I know how swift you are on the draw, but drawing to kill is something that hasn't yet been settled between us, and the only way to settle it is to draw on each other. Neither of us will be satisfied without that. But this is not the time or the place. You ask where I'm going."

He stopped to laugh.

"I'll tell you. I'm going to repay a debt. I'm gone——"

"Yuh don't owe me nothin'. I helped yuh outa messes cause—wal, yuh know w'y. An' it ain't goin' to do yuh no good w'en we start shootin'. Shure I beat yuh target-shootin', an' I got more nicks in my gun than you hev. An' it had to be mighty quick an' straight shootin' fer all o' them."

Thoreau shrugged. "All right. In the meantime you've another job on your hands. Do you want those cows?"

"Tain't much use wantin' 'em. Yuh stampeded 'em."

"You know cows better than I ever will, I know, but I'll bet a plugged nickel that they've settled down by this time, and they're feeding sweetly in some sweet little valley where there's long grass and a bit of water. Of course, they may be scattered a bit, and equally, of course, the Indians are gone. But you and I together can handle them from this on. I know now what you plan to do with them, and I think you're a damned fool. But you won them fairly. I'm helping you to keep them."

Blue Pete stared incredulously at him as he talked. "Yuh mean you--yuh'll help me drive 'em back?"

"I'll help you drive them wherever you want. Yes, I know I rustled them, but they're yours now. I'm playing the game. I stampeded them, I know, but that was a little debt I felt I had to pay. There wouldn't be any fun now getting them away from you, even if I could."

The half-breed frowned over the pinto's ears. Thoreau had always been a puzzle to him, but he had let it pass as due to his superior education. He liked him, though now and then he shrank from streaks of unexpected brutality. But he knew he could trust his word. But why this? In his dilemma he sparred for time.

"Mebbe them Neches'll be 'round somewhars."

"You know they won't. They've seized the opportunity to scurry for home. At any rate," he laughed, "it relieves me and you of having to pay them."

Blue Pete grunted. "Paym' 'em's my business. They done the job fer two days. I ain't own' nobody nothin'."

"All right. Me, too. Don't you think I want to pay my debts? Do what you damn please with the Indians. I've got something to pay them myself, but that can wait, the dirty cowards. We could have held those

fellows off till dark if they hadn't run out on me. But," with a short chuckle, "that would have prevented a situation I find amusing, even if you don't. And don't be so damned proud and thin skinned. It needn't - it won't - alter the situation between us if I help you through. I'd like to finish it off this way, it'll leave me something to laugh about."

Blue Pete granted irritably. "Don' matter to me none. Reckon I'll need help."

They continued their way. About the middle of the afternoon as they came over the top of a rise the Belly River lay before them, and along its banks several broken groups of cattle fed quietly.

Thoreau pointed. "I'm not the cowman you are, but if those aren't some of the cows we're looking for I'm a duffer. Suppose you ride around that end and drive them down this way. The ford is a little to the south. From what the Indians told me it's about the only place to get cows across without a lot of tiresome swimming. I know where they can cross with only a few yards of deep water. I'll head them off and hold them at the ford. We shouldn't have much trouble with them."

It was the best plan, and Blue Pete set off toward the north. Further along the bank of the river he came on other small groups of the rustled cows and slowly drove them southward to where Thoreau waited for them. Giving them time then to rest, they urged them into the water.

"I told you what the Indians would do," said Thoreau, as they set out after the crossing. "If ever they see you again they'll swear they never met you. They'd say the same about me if they weren't afraid of me. They don't know that I shot one of their friends, either. But they'll have it in for you. They've recognized you. You fooled them as an Indian, and

now they know you must have had something nasty in mind or you wouldn't have disguised yourself. I'd keep out of range of their rifles, if I were you. They had learned before to dislike you. Now they'll hate you to the point of murder. Don't count on me to come to your assistance if——"

"Don't need nobody, Franchy," growled Blue Pete.

"No?" Thorrau shrugged. "All right. Only I'll be damned mad if anyone gets you in the end but myself."

"I wisht yuh'd git out," said the half-breed pettishly. "Yuh make me mad, an' we can't do nothin' 'bout it now. I kin handle th' cows alone."

But Thorrau would not consider it. "You have three or four nights of it yet, and I don't believe you've slept since that little affair in the valley. You wouldn't dare. I'd hate to think we met to play our little game when you weren't at your best. No, I'll toddle along with you and give you a chance to sleep. We'll sleep in turns. I haven't had my quota for a week or so. And don't fear that I might get you into something unpleasant. When we get the cows near where you want them I'll disappear. You won't have to be for me to save me from the lynching the ranchers have for any rustler they lay their hands on."

"Besides, you have a job on your hands. Most of these cattle are from the Circle K. That ranch is still sixty or seventy miles away. You'll be more than three days reaching it. And on the way, you're apt to run against inquisitive punchers who are looking for rustlers. Perhaps I can handle them better than you, even if I look like an Indian. I've got more patience than you."

"And by the way, we may need a good story or two, and we must have them straight. If anyone asks questions, we've found the cattle near the border,

near the headwaters of the Belly But I'm needed over there, I see."

He rode away to round up with the herd a straying steer Blue Pete looked after him with a bewildered frown

"Dang 'im," he exploded to Whiskers. "Takes a lot o' thinkin' an' 'memberin' to keep in mind we ain't fren's . . . 'Tain't goin' to be all honey neither w'en the time comes. Now giddup an' head that steer off, ole gal."

CHAPTER XIV

UNORTHODOX DELIVERY

WITHOUT Thoreau's assistance it is doubtful that the herd would have reached its destination. He was particularly valuable in getting the cattle past other herds and their attendant cowboys. Only once was it impossible to avoid the curiosity they were certain to find it difficult to satisfy. Forc'd from the direct route to avoid a small herd they came face to face in a bend in the course they were following with a cowboy doing in his saddle. Beyond him a large herd ate placidly in a fertile bottom.

As their herd came round the bend the cowboy wakened and wheeled to face it, at the same time reaching for his rifle. The punchers of the district had been thoroughly aroused by the rustling and were nervous, they were almost prepared to shoot strangers at sight.

It was too late to turn aside, and Blue Pete and Thoreau allowed their herd to follow the course, Thoreau taking the precaution to ride along the flank to prevent the two herds mangling. It was Thoreau the cowboy saw first, and, taking him for an Indian, he signalled to distant companions and rode furiously forward to make inquiries.

Thoreau continued stolidly on, paying no attention to the puncher's shouts. But from the corner of his eye he watched every move. There could be little doubt of the tension under which the cowboys worked from day to day, and there was always the possibility

that they might shoot first and inquire later. But the contempt in which the Indians were held promised to save him from a thoughtless bullet.

Then Blue Pete came riding into view. The cowboy saw him and pulled up. This was no Indian, and he waved again to his companions and sat waiting for them, unprepared to face two strangers alone.

The half-breed swung along carelessly toward him, at the same time motioning to Thoreau to head the herd out of the coulee. Since cutting out the two herds would be a long and difficult task and the provision against it was carried through with no apparent effort to evade the cowboys, there was nothing to arouse suspicion, and the cowboy instinctively rode between the herds and helped keep them apart. Blue Pete waved his thanks and rode on.

But it was not yet over. As the herd, directed by Thoreau, disappeared over the ridge, the cowboy came clattering up to Blue Pete.

"What outfit ya ridin' for?" he demanded.

"Circle R," replied Blue Pete.

But the cowboy had read several of the brands as the cattle passed him. He looked the half-breed over suspiciously. "Them ain't all Circle R's."

Blue Pete returned the look contemptuously.

"Say, stranger, I cud read bran's w'en you was livin' on milk."

"Then whachu doin' with a mixed herd like that?" persisted the cowboy, growing more truculent.

"Drivin' 'em. Use yer eyes—an' yer brains, ef you got 'em."

"That's what I done. Yu got Pitchforks there, an' Turkey Tracks, an' JAC's, an' —"

Blue Pete shrugged wearily. "Shure I got more'n that. Ef I ain't got none o' yours, wot business is it o' yours?"

Two other cowboys had come up and had heard One, evidently the foreman, broke into the conversation

"Yu ast if it's any business of ours, stranger. It's our business if them's wet cows."

"Shure—ef thar's any o' yours 'mong 'em. Le's see, wot's yer brand?"

"Lazy S."

Blue Pete pushed back his sombrero and scratched his head. He raised his face to the sky and squinted reflectively. "Come to think of it, mebbe thar's a Lazy S er two thar. Fact, thar's six o' them. Wanna cut 'em out?"

"You bet we'll cut 'em out. And, by the way, what are you doin' with 'em?"

"Handin' 'em over, yuh dang fool. Ef yuh ain't too dang lazy to do yer own cuttin'. Ef yuh are I'll jes' run 'em up to Calgary—or somewhar—for the bronco-bustin' show." He spat contemptuously. "Think I'm doin' this fer practice? Say, I don' need no practice at nothin', not even at cuttin' out. But I ain' doin' it fer the Lazy S."

A whispered conversation took place among the cowboys. The foreman turned to the half-breed.

"You've got Montana brands there too."

"Shure. I told yuh I wasn' cuttin' out fer nobody. Ef them Montany cows wanna git themselves cluttered up with the herd I'm punchin', it's jes' too bad fer them, that's all."

The foreman frowned. "You mean to tell me you punched 'em up all the way from Montana?"

"Naw, they brung me 'long. I like cows. I was born with 'em. I jes' nachully mozy 'long wherever I see 'em." He spat again. "Ef yuh're thinkin' o' doin' the cuttin', jump to it. I'm not waitin' fer nobody. Them Montany cows don' need to worry yuh."

none. An' git catten' mighty smart er I'm passin' on "

Thoreau, once he had the cows well away, had ridden back. He waited now on the ridge, in case he might be needed. The three cowboys loped past him toward the herd. At a signal from Blue Pete he did nothing to stop them. The half-breed rode up to him, and they sat and watched the punchers at work. Blue Pete scratched his head.

"Six outa forty-seven. That's wot they git. Reckon they otta pony out suthin' fer that, but I ain' got no time to collect. Mebbe I'll come back later an' do that "

Thoreau watched the operation with an enigmatic smile on his darkened face.

"Special delivery, this, eh, Pete? Have you the home address and telephone numbers of the other forty-one?"

"Goun' to be some job," agreed the half-breed. Then his face brightened. "But I ain't workin' fer nobody but the Circle R. Most o' them's that brand. Ef we bump into other punchers that own wot we got, aw right, they kin do wot the Lazy S 's dom'. Ef we don't—wal, that's thar loss "

Thoreau whistled. "Aha! So you're working for the Circle R. That's what all this means. What's the pay?"

"Not a dang cent."

"You mean you're doing this for nothing?"

"Not on yer tintype. I'm gittin' paid good 'nuff "

Thoreau shook his head understandingly. "You have me guessin', Pete. What do you mean?"

"Wal, same 's I'd be paid w'en I git you, Frenchy. I tol' Mister Suffron I'd stop the rustlin'. Sorta meant I'd git the cows back "

"You knew it was I doing it," laughed Thoreau.

"I seen yer hand, aw right "

Thorau's face clouded for a moment, but it vanished as he laughed. "And a man to whom you owe nothing got you to do this for him, risking even your life "

"Oh, he's gotta pay. Them Neches 's gotta be paid. I told 'em I'd pay 'em wot you was payin' "

"I see. And I'm paying nothing. But you bring back forty-seven cows and the Circle R must stand the expense. That doesn't seem fair, does it? "

Blue Pete considered it. "I do see 'bout that w'en the time comes."

"You seem to have the winter ahead rather well filled, Pete," laughed Thorau. "If you collect from all these ranchers, pay the Indians off, and then have this other job to finish, you're going to be——"

"Wot other job?"

"Why me. And Pete, that's going to be the damndest little chore you ever undertook. Just as soon as we get these cows near enough to the Circle R to make them sale I'm clearing out. I must, so we can get a fresh start. Can't you let those ranchers off- or postpone collecting? I don't want to hang around too long with nothing to do. It's damned dull around the Indian camps. And if I'm not to rustle any more, how am I going to fill my time if you delay too long? Don't let these petty side-issues engross you, Pete. They're not worth the attention of a gunman like you. Be a sport and let me have your first services."

Frenchy was serious, Blue Pete knew, but there was a bantering lightness about him that annoyed the half-breed. When it came to words he always felt himself helpless before an educated man like Thorau, and helplessness was apt to make him reckless.

"I ain't talkin' none," he growled. "I'm doin' "

Yuh kin skedaddle any time yuh're too skeered to hang around. I kin git these cows back alone. Yuh make my trigger-finger itch."

Thoreau took pity on him. "Sorry, Pete. You don't need to talk. But what's the use of an education to a fellow if he can't spill it now and then on some suffering companion's head? No, I'm not skedaddling till we've got these cows back safely. When I do, the game's on once more. Let's get along. I'm impatient to start playing."

They urged the cattle along, making more than twenty miles a day. The animals had become trail-hardened and there were no laggards.

As they passed within sight of one collection of ranch buildings, Thoreau jerked a finger toward it. "The Pitchfork. I seem to remember that I succeeded in rounding up a few of that brand. Nice fat steers they were, too. I forget how many."

"Four," declared Blue Pete promptly. "An' now we're thar ef yuh're workin' fer me yuh'll go 'head an' cut 'em out."

Thoreau made a wry face but set out to do as he was told. Blue Pete made no move to assist. When the task was completed, with Thoreau pressing the four farther from the herd, the half-breed rode up to him.

"Drive 'em over in that coulee. The Pitchfork'll find 'em. But wait." He dropped his head in an attitude of deep thought. "Ef yuh got suthun' on yuh to write on, jes' say thar'll be somebody 'round one o' these days to collect fer 'em. Tix it to a horn. Thar's them Neches to pay."

Thoreau chuckled as he wrote on a sheet torn from a notebook. Then he roped a steer and tied the paper to its horn. He drove the small bunch out of sight and returned.

"There are a couple of ranches over to the east, too, the JAC's and——"

"I'm skippin' 'em all. But it 'ud be plumb loco not to drop off the Pitchlocks w'en we're thar. We're skippin' right 'long."

Two more nights and another day they spent together, working always north-westward. The nights were bitterly cold, and both suffered. Thoreau most of all, for his Indian clothing was typically inadequate. Miserable in the early morning of the last day he awakened Blue Pete for his turn on guard.

"This is my last day, Pete. You stand this better than I do. I haven't sufficient Indian blood to go with these duds. I'll stick with you for the day, then I'll make for somewhere more comfortable. Anyway, you'll be all right then. Sorry if it looks like desertion, but you wouldn't find any pleasure in taking up the trail of a corpse. Another night in the open like last night and my fingers would be too stiff to pull a trigger. That wouldn't be any fun for you."

As the sun sank, after a hard day's drive, he helped Blue Pete to round up the herd.

"In twenty minutes the game's on, Pete. By that time all this is forgotten. Shooting at sight, that's the game." He made a wry face. "How often have we promised each other that? And how often has Fate fooled us? . . . You know, I'm getting superstitious about it—I'm beginning to think our feud is going to be settled in some other way. That would be bell for both of us. All the shooting we've done thus far is to protect each other. From now on I hope we can shoot for pleasure. I hope we meet soon."

"We'll meet aw right, Frenchy," the half-breed assured him. "I know we'll meet."

"So long."

"S'long"

Blue Pete watched the round figure in the Indian disguise lope away out of sight in a coulee toward the foothills

"Durn it," he exploded, as he started slowly around the herd, 'it's goin' to be hell w'ichever way it goes."

CHAPTER XV

OFFERS TURNED DOWN

OF course he dare not sleep at all throughout the night. The cattle were quiet enough, there was little to fear that they would wander. But to have wakened and found that the herd had scattered when they were his sole responsibility would have hurt his pride. He was still unwilling to admit that Thoreau's assistance had been necessary from the first. Thoreau had done enough for him without that, as Mira had tried to hammer into him.

In the morning he started the herd on. All day he kept them steadily moving, and by mid afternoon he arrived within a few miles of the Circle R. Leaving the herd contentedly feeding, he rode ahead.

Suffron, dozing as he waited for the night meal, heard him lope past the house and hurried out to see who his visitor was. At sight of the half-breed he laughed a little lugubrously.

"No luck, eh? Well, I can't blame you. The rustlers had too big a start on you. My boys have been trying——"

"Yer boys don' know how to try," said Blue Pete disgustedly. "Yuh'll find yer cows back that way, waitin' to be brought in."

Suffron's eyes widened. "You mean you—you got them back?"

"Reckon I said I wud, didn' I. Wanta see tha're all thar?"

"I want to lay eyes on those cows of mine, you bet I do. Lead me to them."

"Then git yer c'yuse. Tha're coupla miles back."

Suffron hurried indoors and in a few minutes appeared, dressed for a ride. From the stable he selected a horse of which he was proud. It was not a bronco. Almost a foot it towered above the pinto. As they rode out through the gate he looked down on Whiskers and laughed.

"That pocket edition of a pony of yours doesn't size up with you," he said.

"Naw! Wa., she don' size up neither with nothin' on the prairie—'cos that ain't nothin' like her."

"I'd think you're right there," teased the rancher.

Blue Pete bridled at the tone. "I was sayin' I'd put 'er up agin an'than' yuh ever seen fer a half a mile er a hunderd."

Suffron laughed indulgently. "Against this one?"

"Shure. That's wot I meant."

"But, man, this is blood stock, imported from England."

"I bin wonderin' w'y," sneered the half-breed. "Yuh see, 'tain't blood but guts that counts on the prairie. But we're talkin' cows now, not ponies, an' I'm in a hurry. I lef' them cows 'thout a rider. Come on."

He struck his feet against the pinto's sides, carefully turning away the two-inch spurs he wore. Whiskers was off like an arrow and was forty yards ahead before Suffron's horse got into its stride. They raced along the wire fence that surrounded the ranch house. And then Whiskers commenced to draw away.

Blue Pete glancing back, pulled in grinning. Suffron rode up, beside him with a grin of his own.

"After all, I've often wondered why we import horses to the prairie. Perhaps in time we'll develop a larger horse with the guts, as you call it, of the bronco. But I don't believe we'll ever get in that way

something that pinto of yours has. Only a lifetime on the open prairie develops that. You win. By the way, what's your name?"

"Blue Pete."

"I don't mean your nickname—your real name."

"Blue Pete's all I got. Mira calls me Pete—an' some other feren's."

"May I call you that?"

The half-breed ran a speculative eye over him. "Reckon twudn hurt nobody."

"Thanks. Who's Mira?"

Blue Pete's face reddened a little. "Mira's my wife. She's all white. Dunno, never will know, w'y she hitched up with me. . . . Reckon it's 'cos we happened to be in the same game together once."

"What game was that?"

"W'y, that's on'y one game——" He stopped and turned his face away. "She's the bes' cowgirl in the west. . . . best of ever'thin'."

"It's always nice to hear a man talk like that of his wife," Suffron applauded.

"He'd be a skunk ef he wudn't."

"Where do you live?"

But the half-breed considered that the questions had gone far enough. "'Way back."

The shortness of the reply warned Suffron.

"No offence. I hope. I'm interested in you, naturally. If you've got those cows of mine back — Why, yes, there they are."

They had reached the height above the bottom in which the herd fed. Suffron drew in and looked down on it.

"But they can't all be mine, Pete. I don't think I lost so many."

"Tha're not all yours, no," the half-breed told him.

"Thar's Turkey Tracks, an' JAC's, an' Seven Ups, an' a

few more. But most o' them's Circle R's. They done most o' the rustlin' from your bunches. Reckon yuh've been runnin' 'long a bit keerless."

Suffron agreed. They rode down the slope. Suffron's face wore a puzzled expression.

"But I'm damned curious. Where in the world did you find them, and how did you get them? And what about the rustlers?"

Blue Pete shrugged. "Reckon yuh don' need no song an' dance, Mister Suffron. That's yer cows."

Suffron turned slowly and looked his companion over. A tinge of suspicion had come into his eyes.

"What do I owe you, then?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothing? But, look here, I can't have you doing all this for me without pay. I must give you something for all these days you've been at it."

"No, nothin' fer me. But I got a coupla punchers to help me. I gotta pay them."

"Why, yes, certainly. How much?"

Blue Pete reckoned. "Bout twenty-five iron men."

"Iron men?"

"Dollars, I mean. It 'ud bin more but they skedaddled out on me back near the border."

"You mean they ran off on you? If they did that, why do you pay them at all? Not that I want to get out of paying, I'll pay just the same."

Blue Pete moved impatiently in the saddle. "Wust o' doin' things fer people is wot they ast 'bout it. Jes' twenty-five dollars, that's all."

"Can't you tell me more, Pete. Who were the rustlers? We should know that."

But Blue Pete was telling nothing. "They don' matter. Thar won't be no more rustlin'. That's all yuh need know. Leastwise, they won' touch Circle R."

They were beside the herd now. Suffron leaned curiously from the saddle to read some of the brands.

"But here's an Open A, and a BOB, and two or three Rocking Chairs. I don't know those brands around here."

"Shure yuh don't. Them's Montany cows."

Suffron looked up, startled. "You mean they belong to Montana ranches?"

"Shure."

The rancher pushed back his sombrero and looked bewildered. "What do you plan to do with them?"

"Do an'thin' yuh like with 'em. Tha're nothin' to me."

"But—but, man, they're not mine."

The half-breed's lip curled. "Yuh're the fust rancher I ever knowed wot's skeered of a stray er two. Them's strays now. I seen to that. Yuh kin hev 'em. I can't do nothin' with 'em."

"You mean you—you drove them all the way over here from Montana?"

"I hadn' no time to cut 'em out. Wich don' mean I'd 'a' cut 'em out ef I d hed time."

Suffron shook his head and sighed. "I'm afraid all this is too deep for me, Pete. I can't take them. I wouldn't dare, even if I wanted them. I don't see why you bothered to bring them along."

"The bother wud 'a' bin cuttin' 'em out, I'm tellin' yuh. An' I wasn' wastin' no time gittin' back to Canady. They was in the bunch. Ef they wanted to come 'long 'tain't no business o' mine. I ain't workin' fer no Montany outfits."

"Sorry, Pete," Suffron insisted, "but I can't take them. Keep them yourself, if you won't do anything else. You might dispose of them easily enough, I suppose. But don't, for Heaven's sake, say I suggested

it. Now come back to the house and I'll settle with you for the help you had."

Blue Pete did not appear to hear. He sat scowling at the cattle.

"I said——" Suffron began again.

"I heerd yuh fast time. An' yuh ain't settlin' fer nothin'. I'm settin' right here till yuh git yer own cows cut out. An' ef yuh ain't smart bout it I'll run the hull bunch off. Ef yours come 'long 'tain't my fault."

"But—but you can't do that," protested Suffron.

Blue Pete's smile was cold. "Reckon yuh jes' can't 'magine all I kin do, master. I'm runnin' them Montany cows away, but I ain't cuttin' out no Circle R's. Ef yuh wanta do it, git at it."

Suffron looked him over indignantly. "Rather high-handed and independent, aren't you?"

"Can't see no reason w'y not. I got yer cows back, didn' I? Ef yuh do' want 'em say so quick. I got a job to do, I can't wait here all day on yuh neather."

Suffron saw that he meant what he said, and he started in through the herd to cut his own cattle out.

But he was no pancher, nor was his horse trained to the work, and progress was slow. For an hour Blue Pete and Whiskers watched with growing impatience. Then they set to work to help. And presently Suffron's cattle were on their way toward the ranch buildings.

Suffron held out his hand. "Sorry for all this, Pete. The money's waiting for you."

"Bes' blow it on a real cowpony," replied Blue Pete, taking the proffered hand. "That c'yuse yuh're on dunno a steer from a hitchin' post. Got blood, yuh say. Got one with brains an' guts. That critter

smelled them cows; his nose went up w'en yuh got near 'em."

Saffron laughed. "Once I offered you a job. That offer still stands."

"I got a job wuth more 'n yuh cud pay me, mister," said Blue Pete. "S'long."

CHAPTER XVI

MEETING THE INDIANS

THERE deep in the foothills the Indian encampment swarmed with dogs and children. Squaws pattered about on moccasined feet, sullen silent, restless their energies only vaguely directed. The braves of the camp were gathered in a tight group, squatted on the ground about two of their fellows.

It was late in the afternoon. The sun had already touched the tips of the heights to the west, throwing a stranger, soft radiance over the valley where the tepees were set up. Now and then a dog barked indolently. The only other sounds were the occasional clatter made by the squaws in their tasks, and the low hum of voices from the beaver.

Leaping Rabbit, one of the pair in the centre of the group, did most of the talking. Sharp grunts from the group about him broke in on his story grunts of excitement and anger. Now and then their eyes turned vindictively toward the west. Squaws paused and repaused as the discussion continued, each with an ear turned eagerly to what was so absorbing their men. One of them, young and buxom, lingered longer than the rest. And Leaping Rabbit noticing her, frowned and waved her away.

As she went something seemed to attract her attention, for she turned and faced toward the east, peering along the narrow valley. Immovable as a statue, she drew a score of eyes, at first of other squaws, then of the braves themselves. The voice of Leaping Rabbit

ceased. The Indians rose as a man and turned in the direction the squaws were staring.

At a sharp word from one, evidently the chief, half a dozen gaded swiftly away. They vanished into nearby tepees and reappeared with rifles in their hands. The squaws, all but the one who had first heard what they all now seemed to hear, retired behind the men.

Presently, winding around a curve in the cleared bottom of the valley, came a herd of cattle, almost a score of them. Behind rode a hulking figure, slouching along on an absurd little pinto. A peaceful scene—merely a half-breed, cross-eyed, round-shouldered, one leg slung carelessly across the saddle, lazily swinging a quirt.

But the effect on the Indians was significant. Their eyes widened, and they glanced incredulously at one another. Those with the rifles handled them restlessly, looking for instructions from their chief.

The half-breed came on. He saw them and raised the quirt in a limp greeting.

The squaw who had first heard the approaching cows, took a step forward, her eyes bright. An involuntary step, for she stopped then and waited, her hands clasped to her breast.

Leaping Rabbit pushed from the throng and advanced in long strides. The squaw moved slowly forward.

The cattle had paused to feed. Blue Pete passed through them. He reached the squaw first. But he did not so much as give her a glance, and a flash of anger crossed her face.

Leaping Rabbit caught her and thrust her aside with a force that almost knocked her from her feet, snorting at her as she crept away. Blue Pete beamed down on the Indian and greeted him in Blackfeet.

Then he looked enquiringly toward the chief, waiting to be welcomed.

Leaping Rabbit turned and stalked back to the chief.

"A friend," he said.

"Since when?" asked the chief angrily.

"Had he been otherwise he could have taken many lives from among us. I know. I saw him shooting. He misses only when he wishes to. Besides, if he were not a friend he would not have dared to come here."

The chief glanced in the direction of the discomfited squaw and smiled.

"He threatened you," he reminded Leaping Rabbit.

"He could have done much worse than threaten. He has come to pay us what he owes us—perhaps."

That thought brought another, and he returned to the half-breed.

"The cows stampeded," he explained. "We could not stop them. We did not know what to do, so we came on here."

"I might have needed you," Blue Pete upbraided mildly. He had an idea that the Indians knew more than a little of the fight he and Thoreau had been forced to wage before they escaped, but nothing could be gained by accusing them of desertion. "Yes, there was no need to remain. I've come to pay you what I owe you."

Leaping Rabbit had been joined by the other Indian who had been with him in the rustling. They regarded each other with frank surprise. Blue Pete pretended not to notice.

"You worked for two days. I owe you half what I offered. I'm going to pay you more." He turned and flung out a hand toward the feeding herd. "They're yours."

Again that look of surprise, mingled slightly with consternation. The two Indians walked away toward the cattle. The chief came forward.

"Thunder Face is no longer an Indian," he accused.

Blue Pete grinned apologetically. "I could be. I'm more Indian than white."

"Why did you deceive us?"

"I was looking for someone."

"Why?"

"Someone informed on me to the Mounted Police." lied the half-breed. "I thought he might have taken refuge among you."

They talked, of course, in Blackfoot.

"We have nothing to do with informers," replied the chief stiffly. "But you shot at us."

"Not till I had to shoot to save myself. You were shooting at me. I injured no one. I could have."

The chief considered that. But he was still unsatisfied. "You could not speak our language then."

"I had no wish to be questioned, for fear the one I sought might hear of me."

"You were spying on us. You return to spy on us again."

"Far from it, chief. I return to pay your men what I promised them."

"Then what do those cattle mean?"

"That's how I'm paying."

Leaping Rabbit came forward and addressed the chief in a low tone.

"But the cattle are not yours to give," said the latter. "They're from Montana."

Blue Pete nodded complacently. "Yes. So far away that you're safe in doing what you like with them. The Circle R refused them."

The chief eyed the cattle hungrily, but a vision of the inquisitive Mounted Police intervened.

"We can't take them," he decided. "The Mounted Police would be sure to find out."

The half-breed had not thought of that. He pushed back his sombrero and ran his fingers through the thick thatch of jet black hair. It had seemed to him that, since the cattle were lost to their owners when he took them in hand, he might do with them what he wished.

"At least you might kill two or three for food and the hides. It would provide your winter meat."

The eyes of the chief brightened, but still he hesitated. "We are not rustlers," he declared, with a weak struggle for dignity.

The half-breed grinned. "Is that so?" He let his glance wander toward Leaping Rabbit.

A smile tugged at the corners of the chief's lips. Blue Pete noticed it. Suddenly he saw the opportunity that was offered him: he might ingratiate himself with the Indians and use their camp as a base in his pursuit of Thorau. The latter was bound to turn up before long. It would almost be necessary to keep the Indians as friends, not only to minimize the task he had undertaken but to provide shelter during the coming cold days, should the task take longer than he reckoned. Besides, only through the Indians could he hope to keep track of Freochy.

"I'll kill a couple of them myself for you," he offered.

"No, no, we will have nothing to do with it. The cattle must be driven away, if the Mounted Police find them here they will blame us. You will take them away."

The chief's manner had unaccountably altered. He appeared nervous, anxious to be rid of his visitor. He did not know that Blue Pete had already spied on the camp, having ridden ahead of the herd. He had seen the conference, and he knew that some-

thing exciting was going on about the camp. Now he saw that some thought had come into the chief's head that made him an unwelcome visitor. It could not be a sudden memory of his visit of several weeks before, when he had had to shoot his way out.¹

"Well," he asked, "are you taking them?"

The chief still hesitated. Then turning to the men behind them, he ordered them to cut out four of the fattest of the herd.

"We will take them," he told Blue Pete, "but we will kill them ourselves. The others you must drive away, right now. And don't drive them back along the valley. If they're seen. Did anyone see you driving them in?" he enquired anxiously.

Blue Pete shook his head. "I'm not a tenderfoot."

"Two of my men will help you drive them back. You'll take them over the hill to the south. My men will show you the way. You can then turn them loose on the prairie. And now good-bye. The cows you have given us will see us through the winter. It promises to be a hard one. I thank you, and again good-bye."

There was an urgency about it that mystified the half-breed, made him curious. But he joined the two Indians ordered to help him, waving a careless farewell as they passed out of sight into the forest that covered the slope.

As he rode he thought hard. The herd picked its way upward through the trees, working toward the south-east. Whiskers fell in behind.

She fell farther and farther behind as they descended the other side, making for the next valley. She fell so far behind that presently Blue Pete could no longer see the Indians. It was growing dark among the trees, so that it was easy to turn and ride back westward. After a time not a sound of the moving herd was

¹ *Blue Pete Rides*

audible. The Indians would not dare to leave them till their work was completed. They would think that he had dropped behind and missed them. Their first thought would be to get the cattle well away, to relieve the encampment of any suspicion of being connected with them.

Blue Pete rode on into the darkness.

CHAPTER XVII

A COUPLE OF SHOTS

MORNING broke over the encampment. Squaws appeared one by one and squatted before makeshift stoves or fire-holes in the ground. In the chill morning air the smoke of a score of fires rose in the air, filling it with the odour of burning pine.

Now and then one of the squaws would pause in her work and turn her eyes toward a large tepee set in the heart of an open circle near the middle of the camp. Muttered words would pass between them as they looked, and then they would drop back to their work. In their eyes was a shadow of fear, of excitement.

From the flap of the large tepee the chief appeared. He was tall and muscular, dressed more carefully and elaborately than the other braves of the camp. For several moments he remained before the open flap, staring off toward the mountains. His face was grim and stern, but shadowed by a slight uneasiness. Then he seemed to shrug some depressing thought aside, for he turned quickly and disappeared back into the tepee.

Other braves came into the open, and always they faced toward the west for a few moments.

An atmosphere of restrained excitement lay over the camp.

The dogs that clutter every Indian encampment howled, for they, too, were uneasy as they trotted about, searching for something to assuage the hunger

that was seldom satisfied. Children kept them from the cooking food, kicking at them, throwing sticks, shouting. And when their attention turned their mothers were there to smack them smartly for it.

These westward glances were no part of a morning rite. Their minds dwelt not on the machinery of some strange religion. Far from it.

Up there, deeper in the valley, far removed from the camp, in the heart of a small clearing in the forest, was a curious and striking scene.

A man was bound to a tree, bound as only an Indian can or will bind an enemy. He stood with his back against the tree, his wrists tied together around the trunk, his legs held so far apart around the sides of the trunk that they only in part supported him. Only his head was free to move. Down the side of his face blood was dotted. It had come from a wound above the ear.

The position he was in must have been a terrific strain on his muscles, for he had been there since the afternoon of the previous day. And it had been a cold night. Now and then a slight shiver ran through him, and his head sank forward with fatigue.

Throughout the night it had been like that. Sometimes he let himself go against the pull of his arms, sometimes he stiffened his leg muscles to relieve his arms.

A stoutish man he was, with a round face. An Indian, at least in appearance.

Near him a pair of Indians, warmly wrapped in blankets, were seated cross-legged on a thick layer of pine needles. Beside them lay their rifles. At times they shook, swaying where they sat. But with the coming of day they awakened.

One muttered angrily to the other and picking up a dried cone hurled it viciously at the man tied to the tree. It came straight for his face, and he could only turn and take it on the cheek.

An oath in English burst from him "You damned swine!" he snarled "I'll get you yet, if I have to die a thousand deaths for it."

Then something about it appeared to strike his sense of humour, for he raised his head and laughed.

"A thousand deaths. One of them appears to be well on the way. They think so. But Eugene Thoreau has been in tighter places before. They have to

uprise me before they can hang me. I don't think they'll risk shooting me. Besides, it wouldn't be so much fun for them."

He looked about, his eyes twinkling. "I wonder which limb is going to be my gallows. I should ask for a snip of the rope, just to prove to Blue Pete why I failed to keep an appointment. Or perhaps Inspector Barker would like it to frame and hang in his office over the text 'Crime doesn't Pay.' I feel sorry

for the half-breed, he'll certainly be cut up about this, and I've a hunch there'll be some fallen heads as a result. He'll hate to think a damned Neche got ahead of him. If they get away with it I hope

he finds out. The bullets he had for me he can use on the Indians."

He talked in a normal tone. Not an Indian in the camp understood English and something in the very sound of his own voice made him feel less dazed.

"But why do I look so far ahead? They haven't strung me up yet, not by a damned sight. The chief promised it but even Indian chiefs have been known to break their promises. I'm going to help him break this one. There'll be things happen in this corner of the woods before my neck snaps. If they give me a good chance to say 'boo' to them they'll hide under the bed. Only there are no beds to get under."

He was silent for several minutes.

"But what cuts me all up is how the devil I ever

let them get their hands on me like this. Sometimes I'm too cocksure. Some day it may be the death of me.

Leaping Rabbit must have seen me shoot that white-livered cur. There was no one else there to see. Except Blue Pete, of course, but he wouldn't tell, even if he dare show his nose around this camp again. They must have been waiting for me, and like a damned fool I walked into the trap. Just this one slap on the head, and the next thing I knew I was here with a tree for a bed companion."

The Indian had picked up another cone. Thoreau glared at him. "Strike me with that," he snarled in Blackfeet, "and I'll cut your liver out and hang it up for the mountain cats to guzzle. You're the first one I'll fill full of lead when I get out of this. Go on, damn you, why don't you throw it?"

For something in Thoreau's tone and looks had softened the Indian's courage. His eyes flickered away, and the cone fell to the ground.

A chorus of barking dogs reached them from the east where the encampment lay. An air of expectancy filled the little clearing. And presently half a dozen starving curs appeared from the trees. Behind came the Indian braves, headed by their chief. Further back, determined to miss nothing, the squaws silently followed every move.

The chief advanced alone. He moved with a dignity that brought a laugh to Thoreau's lips.

"Trying to stiffen those shaking knees of yours, chief?" he jeered. "But I can see them knocking together. You shouldn't have to put this thing through, it needs someone with more guts. There's that rat, Leaping Rabbit. Let him handle it. I've got a nice soft nosed bullet for him, so he'd have some reason to make a really complete job of it. You're scared, just plain scared. Tell the Rabbit to stand off far

enough that I can't spit on him, and he can shoot me down. I assure you it's the only safe thing to do, and you'll feel a lot safer when the Mounted Police come smelling around. They smell blood like a hound, you know. And now before you start the fun, I'm going to tell you something that will curdle the little courage you have left. You think I'm—

He had thought to hurl in their teeth that he was not an Indian, but something made him pause. He might need the incognito later. For nothing but death would kill the confidence he felt that Eugene Thoreau could take care of himself in any emergency, he did not know the word despair.

His taunting words had their effect. The chief strode forward angrily and took his stand before the helpless man.

"You thought Leaping Rabbit did not know you shot White Swan. You thought you could return here to us and live with us as before, biding your time to play some other murderous trick on us. I know not what you have in mind. I know not why you ever came to us, nor does anyone else. We made you welcome. And in return you take our men to help you steal cattle. We are not thieves."

Thoreau made a contemptuous sound. "You aren't when you're frightened. And most of the time you're afraid of the Mounted Police. That's all that keeps you from showing what unmitigated rogues you are. No, you aren't thieves. All you are is murderers

when you can put it over. And cowards—cowards always. Yes, I shot White Swan, because he lacked more than ordinary guts. He was one of you, a bunch of cowards. I'd have shot the two who came through it when I got rid of those cattle. They, too, ran off on me. I'm not forgetting them. Leaping Rabbit will go first, the dirty coyote. It was he banged me

on the head when I was unprepared for it. All I regret is that I can't kill him twice. Perhaps a bit of torture first might satisfy me.

The chief frowned. Years of enforced observance of the laws of the white man had robbed him of most of his inherited cruelty and bloodthirstiness, and such murderous intensity coloured Thorau's defiant threat that a shudder of dread ran through him. But he remembered that he was a chief, that the tribe under him expected something of him. Besides, Thorau was known to him as an Indian. He must pay to Indians the penalty of his crime. Thorau as Round Owl had lived among them for several weeks.

"You speak big words," he said. "They will avast you nothing now. You killed one of us, you must pay the penalty. Your life is forfeit."

Thorau spat contemptuously. "You place my life against that of a slinking log like White Swan? He was never anything but a coward. You're all cowards. I could find none among you to help me but cowards. Only a lot of cowards would have left me here like this all night. You thought the strain and pain of it would make me howl for mercy. I fooled you. You can't hang an unconscious man now, and it doesn't look so easy, does it?"

"You've talked all around. And you've only started to fail. Bless you, you're not going to hang me. I'm going to get out of this if only to pay the debt I owe Leaping Rabbit. I won't protest if a lot of the rest of you happen to get in the way when I start working on him. A tribe of cowards doesn't deserve to live. But why don't you get along with it? Still, I'm grateful for the chance to tell you what a lousy pack you are."

An angry murmur rose from the braves, and Leaping Rabbit pressed forward and struck him across the mouth with the back of his hand. Thorau's response

was to spit in his face and he laughed as Leaping Rabbit failed to dodge it.

The Indian raised his hand for another blow, but a sharp word from the chief stopped him.

Theroux's lips were bleeding, but he laughed.

'On second thoughts, chief, I may let you off. You're not half bad. I know you've got to go on with this to keep your job. But Leaping Rabbit and that devil over there, working toward the Indian who had struck him with the cane, are going to make some thing of another work. He let his eyes rove over the gathered braves. Anyone else want to enter his name on the list? I'll be well supplied with shells when I start shooting. The list is always open.

The chief made an impatient sign. He turned and raised a row of ten and had a dozen of his bowmen hastened forward. They approached Theroux with care, remembering his welcome to Leaping Rabbit. The big peace man watched them with no sign of fear or foreboding. Yet what could he hope for? Among all those faces was not one with a gleam of friendliness, not one but was there to gloat over his death.

He had convinced himself that they did not plan to shoot him. Had that been in their mind they would have done it long ago. And hanging that they had learned from the white man, usually to their own cost, was more degrading and more of a spectacle. It was the penalty reserved by the white men for rustlers, unless the law anticipated them.

The Indians gathered about the bound man. Two seized each arm while two others worked at the knots that bound his wrists behind the tree. Leaning the body forward then they tied his wrists once more behind him. Only then were his legs freed.

One leg he managed to wrench from their grasp, and an Indian went flying as the foot lashed out.

But others scrambled forward and held him. Once he brought his head up sharply. It caught one on the face and the fellow retired bleeding freely. A sharply raised knee struck a grouch, and a third Indian had had enough.

They attacked more cautiously. Thoreau sneered.

"Too bad I'm not large enough to let you all take a hand—or a kick. Dear me, I apologize."

But there was nothing he could effectively do toward escape, and at last they had him so tightly held that he could not move.

A pony was brought up, and he was lifted on its back while for the time being three Indians on either side braced his legs against the pony's flanks. Another group had thrown a rope over a limb. A loop dangled at one end. The pony was led beneath the limb and the loop settled over Thoreau's head and was drawn taut by the Indians holding the other end of the rope beyond the limb.

Thoreau regarded the proceedings with the interested detachment of a spectator. The Indians, too, watched. Those about him kept hold of either the pony or his legs. The others looked for some sign of panic, an appeal for mercy. Almost they licked their lips in anticipation, all the inbred cruelty of their origin was aroused. A ready they had planned a celebration, a mad night of dancing and drinking.

Thoreau raised his eyes and looked about him. There was not a ray of hope yet he laughed as the loop slid over his head and settled against his throat. He laughed as the rope tightened. He laughed as the pull slid the rope down the limb and had to be readjusted. He laughed when the pony in its excitement stepped on an Indian's foot and brought a howl of pain. He laughed when the loop had to be loosened to be swung to the back of his neck.

And all the time his hands, bound behind his back, continued to tickle the restless pony until it could scarcely be restrained by the four Indians at its head.

He even laughed when, discovering the cause of the pony's fidgeting, they bound his hands higher to his waist.

A dozen hands reached for the other end of the rope. The Indians were thoroughly roused. They hungered for this defiant man's blood. And again the rope slipped along the limb with the strain. But this time the chief issued an order, and the end was tied to another tree.

Through it all Thoreau laughed.

"You're not playing the game, chief," he said. "I promised to let you off. All right, I'm content. You take this life. I've as many as a cat. In one of the others I'll pay you a visit. In the meantime would you mind scratching the side of my neck where the rope tickles me?"

One of the Indians, with a malicious grin, approached and jabbed his fingers into Thoreau's neck. Whereupon a pair of jaws clamped on the fingers and bit them to the bone. Thoreau spat and laughed.

"Another little memento. You won't need to erect a tombstone to me, you'll all remember me. All ready. Then let's go."

Still the chief hesitated. But a low murmur from his followers brought a sign. The pony moved ahead. The rope tightened.

A shot rang out from the trees up the slope—a second. The taut rope frayed away not far above Thoreau's head and dropped with a thud on the pony's back. It leaped in the air and freed itself. Thoreau bent low over it. He laughed as it tore away. His heels beat a tattoo against its sides.

CHAPTER XVIII

BLUE PETE INTERVENES

FOR a moment a dead silence fell over the Indians. They were stunned. Then, like a lot of frightened rabbits they dived for the nearest cover. Those without arms continued to run. But some of those who had come with rifles took cover behind trees and waited. The chief grabbed a rifle from one of his men and from a point up the slope watched the now empty clearing.

The pony that was to be Thoreau's scaffold had become his salvation. It could be heard in swift flight through the forest. Long before the shots came it had been driven to a frenzy by Thoreau's tickling fingers, and now the heels digging mercilessly into its ribs sent it in mad flight. And as he tore along, Thoreau sent a mocking laugh back to the startled Indians.

But they did not hear him. Something, someone more important, more dangerous, than the man they had so nearly hanged, had intervened. A jeering "yip-ee" dropped to them from the hillside. Several of them recognized the cry, and their teeth ground together in helpless fury.

They waited. The chief shouted an order, and they commenced to spread out, working around to where the shots had come from. An unseen enemy, but now they knew there was only one.

After the two shots that had severed the rope Blue Pete waited for only a few moments. He heard the rush of the pony, followed it with his ears until the

sound died away. He heard the chief's order and silently he stole back into the thicker forest and commenced to work around in the direction Thoreau's pony had taken.

He had left Whiskers far back beyond the village, and he had no fear that the Indians would find her. She had learned to look after herself, her keen ears, and perhaps her nose, always scented danger long before he could. Besides, he could call her any time with the whistle she knew so well.

In the meantime she was of no use to him. At the moment his one concern was to pick up Thoreau's trail and follow it.

After a time, however, he slowed down, for he had been running. He reflected that he had to deal with a man of no ordinary intelligence: that Thoreau would not do what he would be expected to do, that, in fact, none of the ordinary courses that would be taken by one who had been so near death would be taken by him.

The prairie offered the quickest and surest avenue to escape. But would Thoreau take that road? Blue Pete thought not. The Indians, once they recovered from their fright, would make for the prairie and he in wait along the edge of the wooded heights. Besides, Thoreau, now that he had escaped the immediate danger, would not go far. He had certain things to do, and he would not be content till they were done. He would certainly not be frightened away. Somewhere among the foothills he would yet be found.

The half-breed cursed himself for another mad display of thoughtlessness. That exultant, defiant "yip-ee!" would betray him to the Indians. That Thoreau, too, would understand did not matter, he would have sensed immediately the one rifle that

could have shot the rope through. There was, too, no one else interested in his protection.

But now the Indians would be on the lookout for him. And once they had him in their hands he could hope for no mercy.

If Thoreau did not head for the open prairie, where would he go, what direction would he take?

Through the scores of valleys in the foothills were almost as many Indian encampments. And there was no other human life. For a time he might find refuge in one of the camps, but sooner or later the story of what he had done would spread and he would be an outlaw. Passing as an Indian, he might even stand out against that for a time, but his or Indian ways, his impatience, his contempt for the Indians would bring him into disfavor and he would have to move on.

In the meantime winter would settle over the country, and moving on would be almost impossible. That was what Blue Pête feared most - that winter would arrive to block him in the task he had set himself.

In the meantime it was useless to hope to overtake the one he sought, and so, curious to know what was happening among the Indians, he had bated, he started back toward the scene of the interrupted hanging. As he went he moved with the utmost caution. The Indians would be on his trail now. Twice he heard them moving about, and he was forced to avoid them. Only once did he see them. Directly before him a twig snapped, and, dropping flat, he saw a brave creep past not twenty yards away.

It warned him of the risk he ran, and he turned upward over the slope. Unexpectedly he came on the track left by Thoreau's racing pony. At the same moment he became aware that the Indians, too, had

come on it and were following it. Just in time he slid out of sight.

Not far away he heard a grunt. He raised his head. Three Indians were gathered about something on the ground. Then, after a conference too low for him to hear, they scattered and hurried out of sight.

Curious to know what had interested them, he crept to the spot. There at a glance he read what had happened. Thoreau had leaped from his pony. The marks of his heels were plain enough in the soft earth. But from there he had gone—which way? It was to find out that the Indians had set off in different directions.

Rashly he started to make his own investigations. A rifle shot rang out from lower down the slope, and a bullet whistled past to thud into a tree. He ducked, and raced away through the trees. He could hear them coming close on his heels, but the forest was thick enough to screen him until he was out of immediate danger.

He kept directly up the slope, away from the camp, and near the top he increased his pace. Assured that he had left them all behind, he circled back toward the camp. He ran swiftly now, his racing feet making no sound on the soft forest carpet. Through the trees he caught a glimpse of the ragged arrangement of poles above the chief's tepee.

Where Thoreau had thrown himself from the pony was now above and to the west. The camp lay straight below him. Turning westward, he skirted along the slope.

Suddenly he pulled up. Far below him a shriek of terror rang through the forest. It ended in a choking gurgle. He bounded toward it.

He reached the little clearing where Thoreau had so nearly paid the final debt. And there his eyes

alighted on a scene even more surprising than the one he had so startlingly interrupted. From a rope that hung over a limb, the very rope and the very limb that had been used for Thoreau's hanging, a body dangled.

Without a moment's hesitation he dashed to the hanging figure. As he ran he drew his knife. He could not reach the rope above the victim's head, but the other end was tied to a tree beyond the limb and this he slashed through. The man dropped limply to the ground.

The half-breed ran to him and knelt beside him. It was Leaping Rabbit. A hastily-tied knot bound his hands behind him. He was not dead. The slip knot about his neck was loosened, and after a few moments his eyes opened. At first they were clouded with terror. But as he recognized the half-breed he heaved a sigh and weakly raised himself to his elbow.

Blue Pete rose and looked angrily about. Thoreau must have worked fast. In the hour or so since he was borne away on the racing pony he had had to free his hands and return, overpower Leaping Rabbit, and string him up. Only Blue Pete's intervention had forestalled a tragedy.

From somewhere in the distance a taunting laugh dropped down on him. Angrily he plunged toward it.

At sight of a piece of paper stuck to the gum of a pine tree he stopped. Pulling it loose, he read.

"My dear Pete, you must be more careful. I could have picked you off a dozen times. But the little incident in which you so providentially played a hand is not yet closed. Of course I couldn't shoot. That pleasure is reserved for a more opportune time. My compliments for a couple of mighty smart shots.

Could I have fired them? I'm not so sure " It was signed with a scrawled "T"

As he finished reading, that extra sense of impending danger made him raise his head. It was too late. Several Indians stood about him. Their rifles pointed directly at him.

CHAPTER XIX

BLUE PETE A CAPTIVE

RESISTANCE was useless. It was worse than useless, for the Indians were in a mood to shoot Thoreau's (or Round Owl's, as they knew Thoreau in his Indian disguise) escape, when the brutality of their nature was keyed to an expectant height was enough to drive them to any lengths for a substitute victim, but when was added the fury they felt for the man who had robbed them Blue Pete realized that his one chance of avoiding instant death was to submit for the moment and bide his time. He was no less confident than Thoreau had been that in the end he would escape.

He was not unduly alarmed. His contempt for the Indians was too deep for that. But he was ashamed of himself. In his absorption in the near-tragedy he had so narrowly prevented, and in the note Thoreau had left for him his usual cunning had been asleep.

Thinking it over later he could not forgive himself for his carelessness. He had known all the time that Thoreau would never rest until he had paid the debt he considered he owed Leaping Rabbit, but he the half-breed, had not for a moment suspected that he would set to work so swiftly to pay that debt. Something had drawn him back to the spot, now he knew that back in his mind he must have known something was going to happen there and soon.

Some of these reflections raced through his mind as he faced the rifles levelled at him. With a grin

that was half a sneer he raised his arms, at the same time dropping his rifle.

The chief stepped forward and picked it up. From his captive's belt he took the .45 and a second revolver.

"We meet again," he said with a sneer.

"And we're likely to meet at least once more," replied Blue Pete. "The next time things will be different."

He knew that the Indians were as yet unaware of Leaping Rabbit's narrow escape. He had left the dazed Indian on the ground. But it was the Langing man's shriek that had brought his fellows to the spot - and he had not thought of that. In a moment or two, when the immediate excitement had died down, they would begin to wonder about the source of the cry, for obviously it could not have come from their captive.

For the moment, however, they had nothing in mind but their fortunate capture, a bit of good luck that offered some recompense for the entertainment they had missed in Round Owl's escape.

More Indians came on the scene. The chief continued to look the half-breed over. He appeared to be at a loss as to what to do with him. As in Thorau's case, the responsibility was with him for any drastic measures that might be taken, and hovering back in his mind was the picture of an avenging Mounted Police.

Suddenly he remembered the cry. Turning to some of the Indians, he requested its source. It brought to their minds that it could not be accounted for by the immediate scene, and they regarded one another with growing bewilderment and concern.

Blue Pete smiled. "You needn't go far to find out all about it," he said nodding toward the spot where he had left Leaping Rabbit.

At that moment a group of Indians broke through

the surrounding trees. In their midst was Leaping Rabbit. At sight of the rifles pointed at his rescuer his wits returned.

"Don't shoot," he cried. He explained to the chief what had happened.

It wrought little change in the feelings of his fellows. Though the chief appeared more undecided than ever, they clamoured for a victim, and the chief yielded. He ordered them to tie the half-breed up.

Eagerly they set to work. Blue Pete's wrists were bound together and then tied to his body. A second rope was wound about his legs above the knees, leaving him limited freedom of movement with his feet. So that when they set off for the camp he was able to shuffle along a few inches at a time. They were too lazy to carry him. Perhaps, too, they dreaded coming too closely in contact with him.

For the first time he commenced to wonder what was in store for him. He knew well what they had in mind, but against that was the obvious reluctance of the chief to resort to a punishment whose failure only a short time before had left a lurking dread. Besides, now they had to deal with a man with white blood in his veins.

He was not surprised, therefore, when, at the chief's orders, they set off for the camp.

CHAPTER XX

MIRA INSISTS

MIRA STANTON, the white wife of whom Blue Pete was so deeply in awe and with whom he was even more deeply in love, stood before the window of the ranch house of the 3-Bar Y and stared with unseeing eyes at the winding trail that climbed from the hollow in which the ranch buildings were set. It was almost two weeks since her husband had disappeared up that trail to resume his pursuit of Branchy Thoreau.

And in all that time she had no word of him, either directly or from the Mounted Police for whom he had undertaken the dangerous task. Had she been less worried she would have remembered that never yet had he written her whist off on the mysterious and always perilous work Inspector Barker gave him. For one thing, he could write little more than his own name, and his limited accomplishments in that direction as well as his modest opinion of the concern others felt for him, called for little use of them.

The silence of the Mounted Police, even if they were in touch with him, was readily explained by the secrecy that so zealously surrounded their connection.

Always she worried while he was absent. She realized better than anyone else the perils of every task assigned him, the only sort that held any attraction for him. Her association with him, both in some of his roving days and since, constantly warned her of the reckless manner in which he set about those tasks.

The fact that so far he had managed to carry everything through to a successful conclusion had little bearing on each task as he assumed it. From many of them he had returned with fresh scars, from all of them he had escaped by a combination of good fortune, native cunning, skilful marksmanship, and, to some extent, his reputation. Should but one of his favouring guardians fail him she shuddered at the thought of what the result might be. So that each day that passed with no word of his safety left her limp with anxiety.

One of the worst features, too, of the tasks he undertook was that they invariably took him to localities where anything might happen without news of it reaching the rest of the world. Long afterwards someone might stumble on a heap of rags and bones, or on an old grave. For almost without exception he worked alone, and against enemies who knew no scruples.

And so she continued to stand before the window staring unseeing across the gently waving grass toward the spot where she had seen him last. As she leaned on the window-sill her hands were clenched tight. She was thinking, struggling with a thought. For in her mind was a plan, one before which she quailed.

Suddenly she stiffened. Wheeling she hurried to a bedroom off the sitting-room and commenced to change. A few minutes later she emerged, dressed in buckskin riding breeches, a grey flannel shirt, high riding boots, and a grey Stetson.

Casting about the room a swift farewell glance, she opened the front door and stepped outside, drawing the door swiftly behind her. In long strides she set off toward the cluster of buildings that housed the outfit and the horses.

Through the back door of the bunkhouse she entered the kitchen. Wing, the Chinese cook, started back from the table at which he was working and faced her with startled eyes.

"I'm off to the Hat, Wing," she announced without preliminaries. "I won't be back for three or four days. . . . Perhaps more," she added, after a reflective pause.

The cook grinned automatically. "Aw lightec." He squinted his little eyes at her. "Missy wolked. Nothin' ebe' happen Blue Pete. No, no." He shook his head violently.

A wan smile crossed Mira's small features. "I hope you're right, Wing. But we can't say that nothing ever has, can we? Well, good bye."

She turned and hurried back to the house, packed a few things in a waterproof packsack, and returned to the stable. As she had talked to Wing the thought had come to her that she might not return for a much longer time than three or four days. For Inspector Barker might refuse.

In a few minutes Whitey was saddled, the package fastened to the cantle of the saddle, and, with a muscular spring, she was on the bronco's back and away.

Wing watched her disappear over the rise, his head shaking. A cowboy lounged through from the bunkhouse.

"What's she after now, Wing?" he enquired.

"Him. Missy go look fo' him. Missy wolly. I say nothing ebe' happen him. She say neve' can tell. Missy got sense. On'y one got sense about this ranch," he added pointedly. "Mebbe him not shoot so damn quick some time, mebbe not so damn staight. Mebbe somebody else shoot damn staight too an' quick."

The cowboy strolled thoughtfully about the kitchen.

"He sure does have the damndest luck. Wonder what the devil they're up to now both of them?"

Wing's eyes wrinkled cunningly. "You got into flubbe again, Nick? Maybe they find out Nick ranmoose. Good job, too."

What makes you think I'm in trouble, you yellow devil? demanded the cowboy, with a scowl.

"Wing knows Nick. Flubbe Nick's second name. An' now git out." Wing picked up a heavy frying pan, and Nick with a laugh returned to the front part of the building, closing the door behind him.

Out on the prairie Mira loped swiftly northward. Two miles from the ranch house she joined the main trail. In the salt brown sea of the double sunken grooves that were the trail started many decades, perhaps centuries, before by buffalo, the pad of Whitey's hoofs beat out a soporific rhythm. But she did not feel like sleep; her mind was too active for that.

The pace she set was leisurely and smooth, and her seat in the saddle would have scandalized any well-respecting riding school. But the ground Whitey covered would have discouraged any Eastern horse, and the tireless ease with which she rode would have left any Eastern girl gasping in a few miles. When on a long ride she rode like a cowboy, first on one thigh, then on the other. Her body was bent; it might be said to slouch, but it clung to the saddle as part of the bronco itself. Posting does not fit into a hundred mile ride, nor does it suit the gait of the bronco.

Hour after hour Whitey could maintain that gait without a falter, up hill and down. Mira and her bronco would be on the prairie all night. But both were accustomed to it. Ever since she could remember she had been a cowgirl, first with her brothers on the J-Bar-Y, then with Blue Pete rustling Canadian cattle

across the border to Montana, later rustling horses for the railway contractors in the north,¹ later still, forgiven by the Mounted Police, with Blue Pete back on the J Bar V. Every height and hollow of the long trail she knew every bleached buffalo bone, every dip where old buffalo trails cut across the one she followed every changing vista.

Turner's Crossing, a Mounted Police Post twenty-five miles from the Hat, she passed in the early morning before daylight and the urgency and secret purpose of her visit sent Whitey detouring out over the soft grass that the resident Mounted Policeman might not hear her and detain her.

As daylight dawned she was able to pick out the town star flank in the distance.

The clock in the city hall was striking nine as she reached the top of the cutbank overlooking the town. Dropping down Toronto Street she turned southward at the first cross-street to Main Street. Following it almost to South Railway Street, she came within sight of the Mounted Police barracks across the railway tracks. At sight of it she hesitated. It was in her mind to ride straight on but she wanted to be fresh when she faced the Inspector and so she turned into the stable yard of the Royal Hotel tied Whitey in the stable filled his manger with hay, and entered the hotel from the rear.

As she passed along the hall, Reddy, one of the bartenders, emerged from the bar and hailed her.

"Brought Pete along?" he asked.

Mira continued on to the lobby. "No," she replied "I want a bed."

Reddy had followed her. "Sure thing." He wiped his hands on a voluminous apron. "Rode right through I bet."

¹ *The Return of Blue Pete*

Mira disdained to reply. They climbed the stairs, and Reddy threw open a door.

'Call me at eleven-thirty,' Mira ordered, and closed the door.

She was awake when the knock came. She had not undressed, so that in a few minutes she was outside on South Railway Street. She crossed the tracks to the barracks.

Inspector Barker, too, had been worried. He was worried for Blue Pete, as Mira was, but in addition he was worried, as he always was, in anticipation of the trouble in which the half breed was certain to involve him as a necessary concomitant of his successes. And the devil of it was that he, Inspector Barker, head of the Medicine Hat detachment, had to bear alone the responsibility of that trouble, to cover it up even from the eyes of his superiors.

For Blue Pete's association with the Mounted Police was not only kept from the public but also from the officials at Regina. Many a time the Inspector had made up his mind to delay the white hairs by somehow carrying on without the half breed's help. But there were so many affairs in which the Mounted Police uniform alone would be a handicap, and there were others where only Blue Pete's cunning and daring could hope to bring a successful conclusion.

Yet as each assignment progressed the Inspector's temper grew shorter, his nerves rawer, and his outlook more pessimistic. Success at the expense of every official regulation hung over him like a sword, and self-defence had long since worn thin as justification for the deaths that marked the half breed's progress toward that success.

The West, however, was the home of criminals favoured by every natural condition, and only Blue Pete was prepared to cope with them.

As Mira descended the stairs at the Royal, the Inspector was seated in his rickety chair behind the desk at the barracks, feeling about for some bright spot in the silence that had cloaked the half-breed's existence since he had set out for the second time in pursuit of Eugene Thoreau. So absorbed, indeed, was he in the search that he failed to notice Mira crossing the tracks toward the barracks.

When he did finally notice her it was too late to avoid her. Across the window within a few feet of him she strode making for the front door. He rose hurriedly, thinking to escape by way of the hall. But she was already in the hall when she opened the door.

The colour of his tanned face deepened as he saw himself caught but he managed to smile.

"Oh, hello, Mira! Come to town to do your winter shopping, I suppose."

He continued to block the doorway to his office, as if all Mira could hope for was a word in passing.

Without returning his greeting she came straight toward him.

"Have you heard from him?" she asked, in a low voice, having satisfied herself that no one else was within hearing.

"From whom? Oh, you mean Blue Pete. Why, no. Why should I hear?"

She crowded so close to him that he was forced back into the office. She closed the door behind them.

"It's two weeks since he left. There should be word."

The Inspector returned to his chair and sank into it with a restrained sigh. He tried to smile.

"Why should there be word? Who'd send it? You know he'll never write."

"But the Mounties have ways of keeping in touch with things, with anyone," she persisted.

"Not with Blue Pete. No one can do that. . . In fact, it's because of that that he manages to accomplish what he does."

"You know where he is. You know what he's there for. And you know the sort of man Frenchy is. . . . And you know that a thousand things might happen to Pete there in the foothills and no one would be the wiser for it."

Inspector Barker shook his head. "You take it for granted Thoreau's still in the foothills, where we knew him to be last. But that's not likely. Knowing what we know, he'd have fitted somewhere else. Whether Blue Pete knows where that is we have no way of knowing. Thoreau's too wise a bird to take unnecessary chances."

"But first of all," she insisted, "he's too proud, too sure of himself, to be scared away. Frenchy loves taking chances. It means Blue Pete has to face that fact."

"If he'd taken advantage of the opportunities he had weeks ago when he overtook Thoreau in the foothills we wouldn't have to worry about him now," complained the Inspector.

The revelation that he, too, worried, raised Mira's spirits a little.

"If Pete had finished off Thoreau then he wouldn't be Blue Pete—and he wouldn't be much use to you. The first thing he had to do was to get that 45 of his back from the Indians. If he hadn't done that, Grey Coyote would still be alive to pester you and him, and the Indians would be riding Pete by this time. Besides, if he did what you expect him to do you might as well get your own men to take on the jobs you give him. You know that."

The Inspector shrugged. He knew that every word she spoke was true. "Well, what are you getting at, Mira?"

"I want to know where he is and what he is doing. I want to know he's all right."

"I hope you don't mean you're trying to get me to let you set out to look him up?" The Inspector scowled at her.

"Either I will or someone else must," she declared firmly.

"Don't you dare butt in, my girl. You know how he hates to be interfered with when he's on a job alone. You know you only handicap him when you do butt in."

She smiled wanly. "And sometimes I save his life."

Inspector Barker squirmed uncomfortably. "Perhaps you did a few times. But this time—when he's after Thoreau—you could only make a mess of things."

"Either I go, Inspector," she repeated, "or you send someone else. And that someone," she added firmly, "must be Sergeant Mahon."

He turned from her with a sharp movement that betrayed the depth of his worry, and stared through the dirty window.

"Why the Sergeant?" he enquired.

"Because you know it's only the Sergeant he'll work with. Because they get along so well together. Because only the Sergeant would have any chance of keeping them both out of a mess when they meet."

He did not speak. She eyed him with a slight smile.

"You're worried yourself, Inspector."

He whirled on her. "Damn it, don't I know it? I worry every time I put him at anything. And I worry when I've nothing to keep him busy. I'm not worrying for fear he'll fail. Not by a long shot. He won't fail—if he pulls through alive—I know that. But it's the methods he'll use to succeed that give me sleepless nights. Damn it," he exploded, "sometimes

I wish he would fail. He might learn that one doesn't have to break every law on the calendar to succeed."

"Yet," she told him, "you know you might have sent all your men after Thoreau, and it wouldn't mean you'd get him in a year or two—and you'd probably lose a few men in the chase. You don't think of the lives Pete saves you."

"And in the process," he growled, "he takes a few. . . . But we were talking of sending Mahon. When I sent him before, you know what trouble there was. And you know Pete almost refused to go on with the chase."

"I'm thinking only of his life, of his safety," she countered stubbornly. "Nothing matters to me but his safety. You know he's not safe in this job. Frenchy knows he's after him, and they've sworn to shoot at sight. When Frenchy shoots something's hot. I don't want it to be Pete."

She rose and leaned across the desk, her small hands among the untidy scattering of tobacco.

"Are you going to send Sergeant Mahon, or am I going to butt in, as you call it? I might spoil everything. I know it. But I'm thinking only of Pete. I want an answer, and I want it now. I'm prepared to start for the foothills right away."

The Inspector had come to his feet. He shoved his chair back with his knees and commenced to pace the floor. He drew a handkerchief and wiped his neck. Mira watched, with no sign of relenting on her stern face.

After a time he stopped before her. He waved a clenched fist in her face.

"Damn you and your man! Either one or the other is always getting me into hot water. I may make a mess of it myself if I send Mahon after him. . . . But I don't mind admitting I want to know, just as

you do. I'm worried because I don't want Blue Pete to get hurt—just as much worried as you are, in my way. I know how deadly Thoreau is. I know that when they meet——”

Mrs. interrupted. There was a cold finality in voice and manner. “Are you -going to send—Sergeant Mahon?”

“Damn you, yes,” he shouted. “Now get out. And remember it probably means we’ll lose Eugene Thoreau.”

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNEXPECTED FRIEND

HOBbled though he was, Blue Pete managed at last to reach the encampment. He was helpless, but he was not greatly worried. Life for him had been liberally sprinkled with situations of the sort and their recurrence only lent zest to what would otherwise have been dull. Indeed, on not a few occasions he had tempted something of the sort as necessary to success in what he had undertaken.

The limited use of his legs did fatigue him, of course, but in no other way was he made to suffer. Behind him the chief strode along, stiff and dignified, laden with his captive's rifle and revolvers. An Indian on either side acted as guards. It was quite a procession, and the squaws welcomed it in a double line, silent and expressionless.

In the open circle about the chief's tepee they pulled up. The chief was interested in the nicks on the butt of the .45.

The half-breed laughed.

"It isn't a complete record, chief, by any means," he said. "They're only the ones I got in a fair stand-up fight. Most of them got in the first shot because I wasn't looking. The gun isn't big enough to hold the record of those I killed by beating them to the draw. I'd better warn you, chief, it's dangerous for anyone but myself to play about with that gun."

The chief examined the gun warily.

"You knew Grey C'yute," Blue Pete continued. "Well, he was the last outsider to handle it. He's

somewhere in the Happy Hunting Grounds now. There've been others. Do you wish to join them?"

The chief had had time to recover his nerve. "You talk with a big voice," he scoffed. "I know how to use a gun like this so it won't hurt anyone but the one I point it at."

"You won't have much chance to point it at anyone," Blue Pete warned him confidently.

"You'll never see it again."

"Want to bet? Let's see, what's the bet you'd like most to win?" He screwed up one side of his face thoughtfully. "I'll wager it's to get your hands on Round Owl again. All right, if I don't get that gun back inside a week I'll bring Round Owl to you and let you do what you like with him. It would save me a disagreeable job in the end."

The chief scorned to reply. Thrusting the gun inside his shirt, he stalked into the tepee.

It left Blue Pete wondering what they planned to do with him. Bringing him to the encampment gave him a longer lease of life, at any rate, afforded him a better chance to plan some means of escape. From the formality with which the chief had treated him he gathered that some sort of trial was planned, it would provide some sort of defence, slight as it was, if anything was discovered.

Of course, there could be only one result of such a trial: he would be used to satisfy the blood-hunger of the Indians aroused by the anticipation so cruelly upset by the escape of Thorau. Besides, there was sufficient grounds in his case to exact the extreme penalty.

But much might happen before the sentence they imposed was carried out. Though at the moment he could see no way to get out of their hands. In there in the foothills the Indians were left pretty much to

themselves, so long as they did nothing to break the white man's laws. To a great extent they were their own law-makers. They had their rules, and the Mounted Police left them free to apply most of their own penalties.

It was this isolation recognized by the Mounted Police that kept them within the law for the most part.

They would try him—and they would sentence him to death.

The chief reappeared. Blue Pete looked him over scornfully.

'Aren't you afraid to leave my legs partly free? I might kick myself.'

"You were free once among us," said the chief, "and you almost killed several of us."

'Almost.' Blue Pete laughed. "If I'd wanted to I could have shot you all."

The entire camp had gathered around him. Leaping Rabbit's squaw stood in the forefront of her kind. She tossed her head and sneered. The half-breed heard it and made a face at her. Whereupon, with a muttered curse she turned and pushed her way from the group.

Two or three dogs came nosing about his legs. One sniffed and raised its head for a long, melancholy howl. Blue Pete grinned.

'Even the dogs are afraid of me.'

"No, they hate you as we do," corrected the chief.

"Yes, you're all tarred with the same stick—it's hard to tell one from the other. If I lived in a camp like this I'd get to be a dog, like the rest of you."

A wave of anger rose among the braves. The chief pulled back the flap of his tepee and waved the guards and their captive inside.

Blue Pete was struck instantly with the luxury of the tepee. It was three or four times as large as the others in the camp, and was divided into rooms by walls of laced skins supported on poles. The floor was covered with matted boughs over which other skins were spread. Two surprisingly fine easy chairs made by the Indians themselves, stood in the room he entered, one on a sort of dais. A home-made table stood on the dais before the chair.

At sight of it the half-breed whistled through his teeth.

'Big chief, eh? Well, as the chief's guest I can see I'm going to be comfortable. Has anyone got any tobacco?'

They scorned to reply. He was pushed through an opening into another room. There a stout stake had been driven into the ground. They backed him against it and forced him to sit on the ground. His ankles were then tied and a rope bound him to the stake. It was a completely serviceable and unbreakable jail. All but two left the room.

From where he sat Blue Pete could see through the opening into the other room and on through the outer flap to the outdoors. He could hear, too, that the braves had gathered in the room beyond for a conference. The court was sitting.

Anticipating some entertainment at least from the proceedings he listened. But after a few muttered words the court retired outside.

He was not uncomfortable. The thick spruce, here not covered with skins, furnished a soft seat, and the stake supported his back. The pair of Indians left to guard him squatted against the outer wall. Blue Pete slept.

He was awakened by the entrance of the chief who, after a glance at him, passed on through a flap in the

back wall. The conference, then, must be finished. But he had not been told their decision. The Indian guards aroused by the entrance of their chief, dropped back to sleep. There was no danger that their captive could escape.

Night lay over the camp. From outside came the clatter of pans and the smell of wood smoke. Children, lightly clad, though the air was chill, ran past the tepee glancing in as they went, making no sound. A few dogs prowled about, now and then howling dismally.

The moon rose a half circle. It shone full on the walls of the tepee, casting sufficient light inside to enable Blue Pete to see that the Indian guards slept. By turning his head he could see the brighter outlines through the doorway and the flap that had been left up. From behind the skin wall at his back came the deep breathing of a sleeping man, probably the chief.

There were intervals when a deep silence fell over the world, a silence that seemed to breathe with a listening life. Then a snuffing dog, passing near the tepee, would break the silence. Two or three times some wild animal howled merrily or challengingly far away in the forest, arousing the camp dogs to a noisy protest. Once it awakened one of the Indians, but almost immediately he slept again. In the dim light that filtered through the two openings Blue Pete could see their two heads nodding.

Bound as he was, unable to move his body, but with his legs free except for the rope about his ankles, his muscles commenced to ache. Cramping pains raced up and down his back and over his thighs. There were moments when something like panic seized him, and he was hard pressed to restrain the cries that rose to his lips.

After that first short sleep he could not rest.

Some time after midnight a slight sound beyond the wall of the tepee brought every sense to the alert. It was not made by a dog, for it moved along the wall toward the open flap. Blue Pete fixed his eyes on the opening. Out there, across the open circle in which the tepee was set up, he could dimly see two other tepees, and beyond them the trees of the hillside.

Minutes passed. He blinked his eyes to keep them keen. Every nerve was alive. But for a time now he had heard nothing. Yet he knew that somewhere just beyond that wall of skins someone jerked, someone timid, uncertain, irresolute.

A shadow fell across the ground beyond the flap. Then the figure of a man blotted out the moonlight and the world outside. He came into the opening and stood, a motionless figure.

Blue Pete waited, holding his breath. Danger? He did not think so. The sense he had learned to trust gave no warning. Rescue? He could not think that possible, for who would have any interest in rescuing him, in taking such a risk?

The man came into the inner room. And against the moonlight through the flap Blue Pete recognized Leaping Rabbit!

In his hand the Indian carried a knife.

For almost the first time Blue Pete felt certain that something he had always trusted had failed him. Leaping Rabbit with a knife. It could mean only one thing, a swift, murderous wash and death. And he was helpless to resist. The Indian whose squaw had come to seize the opportunity for clearing a rival from his path.

The Indian leaned forward.

Blue Pete had slowly drawn up his feet. He held them tense, prepared to dash out with them as Leaping Rabbit struck, and to shout for help.

But Leaping Rabbit did not strike. Instead, the knife dropped softly beside Blue Pete. And the half breed remembered that only a few hours before he had saved Leaping Rabbit's life. And an Indian never forgets.

The figure against the moonlight turned soundlessly away.

At that moment another shadow filled the outer opening. A squaw. She tiptoed in, caught Leaping Rabbit by the shoulder, and jerked him outside.

Blue Pete chuckled. Things had gone topsy-turvy in the Leaping Rabbit household.

CHAPTER XXII

FRENCHY TO THE RESCUE

THE Indian guards slept through it all. Blue Pete studied their postures as best he could, to make sure that they were unaware of what had happened.

"Gor swizzle," he thought, "yuh never know w'en yuh is got to cussk a h'il account that s' own' an yuh d' forgot about. Reckon it at hussy s' gone to boss the tope from now on. Ugly young gal too." He shook his head as if made a wry grimace. Reckon at that she s' more my line. n Mura is. Mighta jined up with her. Pity to sp'it two horses.

His thoughts returned to the knife. Leaping Rabbit had dropped beside him. But how could he use it? Moving his feet about he tombed it. But the rustle of the boughs on the floor awakened the guards, and they raised their heads and peered at him through the darkness to make sure that everything was right. Satisfied, they slept again.

The knife. He could feel it under his heels now, and for a moment or two he wondered if he couldn't turn it in some way to rub the ankle ropes across it and sever them. But several minutes of fruitless effort convinced him of the uselessness of trying. Even if he managed to free his feet, that would get him nowhere.

He did manage, however, to crowd the ankle so deeply into the boughs that he hoped it would not be seen.

Again movement awakened the guards, and this time they remained awake. Blue Pete saw to that. When-

ever he saw them nodding he rustled the boughs. Uncomfortable himself, he was going to make certain they would have no more rest. He even whistled. Perhaps it would waken the chief.

He had long since ceased to worry about what the Indians planned to do with him. Only two thoughts were in his head—escape, and what had happened and would happen to Frenchy Thorau.

Helpless as he was, it seemed only natural that Frenchy would leave the district. Would he ever find him again? Thinking it over, perhaps it would be better to fight it out somewhere far from the foothills. In there neither was weapons, both were in danger from others. It offered complications that would not leave them free to settle their dispute in the one way that would satisfy them. The Indians in the foothills would be against them in a war involving them in trouble too serious to permit them to concentrate on their own feud. It could only irritate and handicap them both.

Winter, too, was at hand, so that delay of even a couple of weeks might mean postponing everything until the spring. That threat he could not face.

That he had succeeded in interfering with the chief's rest was apparent enough when the latter, in the early morning light, looked in on him. His face was lined with a deep scowl, and his eyes blazed with anger and hatred.

The half-awake grunted up at him. "Had a peaceful night's rest, chief? We've done well, enough in here, though your friends smell a little." A sudden thought entered his head, and he edged away from the knole and drew the chief's attention to where it was concealed among the boughs. "I was so comfortable that I didn't think it worth while escaping. And I could have. See?"

The guards clambered to their feet and one reached for the knife. Blue Pete kicked out, and the Indian crashed back against the wall of the tepee. The chief picked up the knife and frowned down on it. As he stood within reach, Blue Pete's feet shot forward. They caught the chief on the knees and sent him crashing through the opening.

The two guards rushed to his assistance. Unhurt, but his dignity at a low ebb, the chief stood over his captive, carefully avoiding his feet.

"That's your last kick," he promised. "This morning you die."

Blue Pete laughed. "You mean I will if you have your way."

"Who's to prevent it?"

"You were sure of Round Owl."

"It was you got him free. Now we have you. We'll have Round Owl, too, before long."

"Want to bet on it, chief? That's the second bet I've offered you. Be a sport and bet. I'm willing to bet I get Round Owl before you do."

The chief was puzzled. "What do you mean? You can't want him as we do, it was you shot him free."

"Because he's my victim, not yours. I won't let anyone cut me out of that."

"You may not be so sure of yourself when you feel the rope about your neck. My Council has sentenced you to hang."

"You don't say! What a surprise! Too bad you didn't get at it right away when you got me first. Chief, take the advice of one who has put a lot of men out of the world: never delay a thing like that. Shoot quick and straight. Of course, in this case it's a rope, but the advice holds."

"I'm telling you that because you're not going to hang me now. No, indeed. Why, I've eaten bigger

Neeches for breakfast and I rather like the meal when I hold my nose. I've been hogtied like this a score of times. I've been corrupted by whites and breeds and Indians, and I've been shot at and clubbed and kicked. But I'm still rather good in a fight and with a gun I'm deadly. It isn't much a bunch of dirty Neeches is going to do what all those others did to me. But I'm interested in your plan. What does the show start?"

The chief restrained his anger with difficulty.

"You shoot straight," he said, "but you have no gun. You've been tied before but not by us. You may be all you think you are . . . if you were free. But you're not. You're in prison, we can do what we like with you. No one knows we have you. The Mounted Police can't interfere, and you may be sure they'll never find your body, or if they do they'll never blame this on us."

He swung on his heel and went outside.

Blue Pete winked at the guards. "Great talker isn't he? I see why you chose him. The difference between him and me is that I do things, not just talk them. You notice he wouldn't take my bet. I'm offering it to either of you. I'll bet you one of the guns you took from me against any number of bear skins that Round Owl runs into my nest, and when he does that'll be one of us missing thereafter. Any takers? All right. Then I'm going to warn you. When I get out of this I'm coming back to help myself to some of the bearskins I see about the tepee here. I like cougar skins, too, and wild cats." He looked about.

"So many nice things to help myself to. Hadn't you better warn the chief?"

Not long afterwards the guards were relieved, and a whispered conference took place outside the tepee. From the little he could hear Blue Pete gathered that it was concerned with the source of the knife. He

wondered if, in a moment of impishness, he had opened the way to serious trouble for Leaping Rabbit.

Presently he detected the voice of Leaping Rabbit himself, and there was no embarrassment and fear in it. So long as his squaw did not expose him everything appeared to be all right.

The odour of cooking meat drifted to him, and he suddenly felt weak with hunger. He asked for something to eat, but the request was ignored. After a time the chief and four other Indians entered. They untied his ankles and loosened the rope that bound him to the stake.

At first he could scarcely stand, for every muscle was stiff from the cramped position he had been in all night. But as he stumbled to the door, circulation revived, though he was careful not to show it.

Outside the entire camp awaited him. The silence was significant. To anyone new it would have been terrifying. But Blue Pete looked the faces over with a grin. It was not defiance, merely confidence. Leaping Rabbit's squaw strode from the group and spat at him. Blue Pete winked at her man.

'Take a woman, cat! a cat!' he said, quoting a Blackfoot adage. 'An ugly mountain cat in this case,' he added, as the squaw spat again. 'To y'd shown her where I come from.'

An Indian knelt on either side of him and attached a rope to each ankle. Blue Pete regarded them with surprise and not a little consternation. A pony stood near. Did they plan to tie him to the bronco and drag him to death? It would be just the type of torture that would satisfy them in their present mood. They were, he knew, capable of any form of brutality.

He was led to the pony, two Indians holding each of the ropes. The pony stood beside a stump, and the half-breed was ordered to climb into the saddle.

With the blood coursing naturally now through his veins, his thoughts turned more eagerly and hopefully to escape. But what could he do? With his legs free he might have taken a chance and run, but the ropes from his ankles make flight impossible. At a move his feet would be dragged from under him.

From a stump he threw a leg over the pony and settled himself on its back. Then with the Indians still holding the ropes the pony was led away through the camp back toward the spot where the halving of Thoreau had so narrowly failed.

For just a moment or two as he rode along Blue Pete's eyes were raised to the distant mountains. Would he ever see them again? Not that he recalled anything pleasurable connected with them. He thought of Mrs. St. Inspector Barker, of Thoreau, and of his broken promises.

But the very strain of the situation brought him back. He became his old rooking confident even curious self. They would take him to the very tree where they had planned to hang Thoreau. They would place a noose over his neck and a dozen willing braves would tug at the end beyond the bough. That is, if it went that far. For one thing they had to have a new rope—or, at least, a new loop in the old one. He had shot away one end to save Thoreau and had cut the other to save Leaping Rabbit.

As the procession wound through the trees leaving the squaws behind at the chief's orders, Blue Pete turned and looked back over the straggling but eager Indians. Two of them led the pony. Should he succeed in making it break free of the pair the Indians with the ropes would have him at their mercy. With his hands bound behind him he could do nothing to help himself.

They reached the clearing. He looked up at the bough. It had plainly been used before for the back

was worn smooth. The pony was led beneath it. The loop of a rope was slipped over his head and tightened about his neck. The other end was thrown over the branch and drawn tight by many eager hands.

He worked with little loss of time or movement. There was to be no delay. It came.

But the pony was not slow. It did not know itself to their plan. Blue Pete was responsible for that. By flexing the muscles of his thighs he warned the beast so that it would not startle stir. It fought the Indians at its head, squirming and twisting.

The Indians watched the struggle. After a time he gave a sharp order and Blue Pete was lifted from the pony's back and set on his feet. They could hang him as well without the pony. He was pushed back about twenty paces.

The Indians with the rope awaited only the word of their chief. It came.

At that moment a shril lighted arose in the darkness of the camp. In the dim, terrified screams of squaws, the shrieking of children, the shril barking of dogs. A shout rang out. The Indians stood still, startled, afraid. Terror shone on every face. The alarm coming at the moment it brought them were their nerves were raw, realizing the seriousness of what they were about to do. Those that held the rope wound it hastily about a nearby tree and never saw a. About to commit a major crime in the white man's list they wished nothing more than to be dissociated from it.

A moment later they were in full flight toward the camp, their terror increased by the rapid firing of a gun and the yelping of wounded dogs.

Blue Pete was left alone. Startled himself for a moment at the first alarm, a slow smile of understanding creased his face. But his fan's tied, he could do nothing to release the noose about his neck.

Nor could he reach the other end of the rope to release it by working with his hands behind him.

A laugh broke in on the dilemma, and Frenchy Thoreau emerged from the trees.

"Between us, Pete, we manage to furnish quite an entertaining show now and then," he said.

The half breed scowled. "Yuh dang fool, Frenchy. The Neds'ia be back in a shake an' git yuh. Yuh won't fool 'em long."

"Long enough for my purpose," returned Thoreau complacently. "They may have found out there's nothing much to fear, but they're too busy rounding up their stampeding ponies to bother about me. I saw from the night back there what was going on, but I couldn't get here in time to do anything about it, so I raided the camp. It worked."

He cut the rope that ran from Blue Pete's neck.

"Let's see, you must have been sixty yards away when you shot me free. It offers an interesting test."

He came close to the half breed, turned his back, and started to pace off the sixty yards. It took him in among the trees and for a few seconds he was invisible. But presently he came into view on a higher level. Only his head was visible. He smiled.

"This would be about the place, wouldn't it," he called. "You shot from behind this tree."

He took his stand behind the tree. His rifle came up. He took a long aim.

At the moment he pulled the trigger, Blue Pete stepped sideways as far as the rope would let him. The bullet whistled over his head. He grinned sheepishly, even apologetically.

Thoreau came running, knife in hand.

"Damn you, I wasn't shooting at you but at the rope. I wanted to see if I could do what you did. Now I've got to cut you free."

He slashed away the rope above Blue Pete's head, and with another swing of his arm cut the rope about his wrists.

"Now we've both got to run for it. That shot will bring them on the run. You'd better take the pony, you'll be a bit stiff yet."

But Blue Pete shook his head. "Naw, the pony's yours. I got Whakers waiting fer me. Got goin'. Tha're comin'."

As he vanished up the hill into the forest Thoreau called after him.

"We're even now, aren't we? The game's on again."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHISKERS INVESTIGATES

THERE was no time to reply, even had Blue Pete had one ready. The Indians were sure to be on their way, aware of the track that had been played on them and more determined than ever to exact the penalty. His legs felt almost normal, but shoulders and arms ached with the long captivity, and his hands were half numb.

He took no pains to cover his trail. The one consideration for the time being was to put as great a distance as he could between himself and pursuit. When he was in better condition to defend himself it would be a threat. But with Indian instinct and with the caution born of his long and cruel existence, he moved noiselessly over the ground. Now and then he altered direction, that would at best delay pursuit.

His first thought now was of Wilkes. What had happened to the painter? His long absence would be sure to alarm her, and what she would do then he could not envisage. Of one thing he could be certain after a time she would set out to search for him. But how long would she delay?

And so, far above the encampment, he turned eastward toward the spot where he had left her among the trees. Even if she had grown tired of waiting for him he knew he would be able to find her, and once he came within hearing of her he could always summon her with a whistle.

Unconsciously he chose a route that often brought him more into the open where he could look down on

the encampment, and in the glimpses he caught of it he saw that only the squaws remained about the tepees. The braves, of course, to a man would be off on the chase—furious, vindictive, prepared for any extreme measure against either himself or Thorau. They would not wait for the formality of a trial now, or even of a hanging, should they overtake them.

He noticed then that even the dogs were missing. Presently back along the route he had followed came a fierce baying.

The half breed's teeth bared. Dogs—Indian dogs—they had hounded him at every turn. They surrounded the camps with a network through which he forced his way only at great risk. Already he had paid heavy penalty for taking the risk. He hated those dogs ever more than their masters.

Eyes afire with hatred, he started back along his trail and took cover beside it in a thicket. There he waited, crouched, listening following with his ears the course of the nearer dogs. He was unarmed, but that did not matter.

The threatening howls rang through the trees coming nearer and nearer. From the sound he read that one had pushed well in advance of its fellows. It galloped into view now to ground, baying as it ran. It came close—running downwind, so that it did not know of the peril that lay in wait for it.

As it reached the edge of the thicket Blue Pete sprang on it and his powerful fingers closed about its throat. With only a stifled howl it paid the penalty of its deal. The hideous body he tossed aside as several more dogs and two Indians came into view. At sight of him they halted.

'Y-p-ou' he shouted, and sped away. For several moments they were afraid to follow.

He was unaccountably curious about the encamp-

ment. But now, as he sped along, he was more careful to keep out of sight of it. For the squaws would have heard the dog's dying howl. He caught a glimpse of them once, gathered in a tight group about the chief's tepee, their eyes raised to the hillside.

Behind him the remaining dogs had recommenced their baying, though now they fed farther and farther behind. Now and then a yelp told of the impatience of the Indians.

Blue Pete felt automatically for his .45. Missing it, a surging anger welled through him. They had robbed him of that, and next to Mira and Whiskers it was his great love. It had seen him through strife and struggle, through a life of desperate hazard, had stood between him and a hundred violent deaths. And never yet had it failed him.

He remembered that the chief had it, with his other revolver and his rifle. He was not apt to let that slip from his mind. Now, running unarmed from the Indians, his eyes blazed with fury. He who had toyed with them so often, had mocked and defied them, was fleeing before them for his very life, and there was no way to avoid it.

In his anger he scorned caution, stamping through the trees.

It was Whiskers who saved him from the penalty of his rashness, for the Indians had commenced to gain on him.

As he came into the open once more where he was within sight of the encampment, he stopped, aghast. The squaws still stood searching the hillside from which came the baying of the dogs. Wondering, frightened, they crowded together, blind and deaf to everything else.

It explained why they failed to see a visitor to their camp. Dancing in from the east came Whiskers, head

and tail high, ears stiffly forward, her bright eyes taking in everything. In her mouth she had poked up a rein that had dropped from the saddle horn and, dragging, would have hampered her. Blue Pete always looped the reins over the horn when he left her, for she would not wander except in emergency. Somehow it had fallen loose.

The pinto saw the squaws but paid little attention to them. She knew how little they counted about the camp. Only at intervals did she so much as glance at them, as one glances at a slinking cowardly cur that may nip one's heels as one passes.

But Blue Pete knew how dangerous the Indians were and why, and the pinto did not. The squaws even were not apt to remain inactive long, for they would recognize the pinto. And in the tepees there would still be rifles, even if there were no braves.

Dodging out of sight, he ran down the slope and dived behind a tepee. By the time he had worked his way around where he could see what was going on, the pinto had come to a stop not far from the clustered squaws. They were watching her uncertain what to do. Whiskers stood looking at them, every line a query awaiting a reply.

The humour of it struck Blue Pete, so that he burst out laughing. Whiskers heard the laugh and whirled about. Then, with a low whinny of welcome and relief, she tore back to him.

The squaws too, had heard that laugh and they recognized it even before they saw the one who had laughed. In a moment not one was in sight. Then a single one came into the street. She was Leaping Rabbit's squaw. Across the street she raced to her own tepee.

Blue Pete leaped into the saddle and waved back

at a score of invisible eyes that, he knew, watched his every move. "Yip-ee!" he shouted.

Leaping Rabbit's squaw emerged from her tepee. She carried a rifle. Blue Pete caught the movement in time and ducked out of sight behind a tepee at the edge of the camp as a bullet whistled past.

"She shure don' like me like she useta, ole gal," he laughed. "An' bes' not let on to Mira she ever did. Reckon I jes' don' wear well with Neches, 'specially she-Neches. . . . Durn good thing she don' shoot like Mira. Mira'd 'a' got me shure that time."

He twisted in and out through the three or four tepees at the eastern end of the camp and bolted for the trees.

"Jes' the same, ole gal," he upbraided, "yuh're purty much of a durn fool fer tryin' a stunt like that. Did yuh think yuh had to risk yer neck fer me? Don't like to think yuh think I need it, not with Neches. . . . S'pose them squaws had got yuh. Whar'd I bin then? An' gomme that rem, yuh durn galoot. Yuh ve had it long 'nuff. Now we gotta git . . . fer a w'ile. You 'n' me ain't got nothin' to fight with but our heads, an' we can't afford to lose them. But you wait, ole gal, you wait."

CHAPTER XXIV

PROWLING

NIGHT had fallen over the encampment, a chill October night when the tang of coming winter makes the very air seem to sparkle. In the moonlight the pines stood out like black-coated sentinels about the sleeping teepees. Scarcely a rustle whispered through the forest at intervals, though now and then a frigid blast came from the mountains. The Indians, with the instinct of the wild, had made provision against frost.

The last dull brightness had faded from the teepee walls. The path between the two rows was empty. Even the hardy dogs had sought their cold couches and were curled inside their bushy tails. The ashes of the few fires that had been lit outside for the evening meal were cold and lifeless. The mottled skins and canvas that formed the teepee walls looked more untidy than ever in the moonlight.

It was a clear night only at intervals. Intermittent clouds moved slowly across the moon, casting an uneven, dazling pattern over the valley. Shadows flitted eastward, mottling the ground, slipping across the sleeping teepees.

The innocently moving clouds dulled the keenness of the dogs, and in the chill night they slept with their noses buried in their fur.

A shadow that was not of the clouds moved down the slope above the camp. It slipped from tree to tree, drawing ever nearer. A man peered out over the teepees, his sharp eyes ranging them from end to end,

then he came on. Now and then he paused, searching the valley below him more carefully. Listening.

Where the forest ended he stood for a long time in the shadow. His eyes were now on the sky. The clouds had thinned temporarily, and with evident impatience he held his ground, waiting. From the west came a thicker, larger cloud. As its edge turned from steel to lead he slipped into the open and took shelter against the nearest tepee. There he stood, swinging his head from side to side.

"Ef th' hear me now," he thought, "I'll shure hev to run for it with the bes' legs I got. I ain't nothin' 'thout a gun ag'in the Neches an' thar dogs. But I'll shure come back some time an' clean the camp out. I ain't takin' no more from Neche dogs, I ain't."

He waited, holding his breath. The dogs did not come. The shadow that had moved down from the trees was to them only of the moon, one of a thousand such shadows, a sky caravan.

To the next tepee he crept, waited, crept on—waited, on and on. He moved with the soundlessness of a dream. Five-six-seven tepees, and then the line of them swept into a wide curve. In the heart of the circle thus formed was the chief's tepee.

He reached the curve. Still no betraying dogs. That did not surprise him. He had worked it all out before starting: the early evening wind would have driven the dogs to take shelter under the trees on the other side of the camp. He crept around a tepee and peered into the open circle. In its heart rose the great four-roomed tepee where only a short time before he had sat through an entire night, tied to a stake.

The moon sailed out from behind a cloud. It lit up the tepee, bringing out every coarse leather stitch of the maze of skins that formed the walls. It dealt kindly with the clutter of pole ends that projected

from the peak of the tepee, lining one side with silver, thrusting the other in black lines against the sky.

For a few minutes he studied the situation. From that side, with the moon full on him, it would be unwise to approach. And so he worked around the curve to the west. There the chief's tepee threw a long shadow toward him.

A cloud came gliding across the sky. It touched the moon. It was a small cloud but the half-breed could wait no longer. In its shadow he darted across the clearing and crouched against the wall of the large tepee. There, seated on his haunches, he tried to fix in his mind the arrangement of the four rooms inside.

A second shadow crept down the slope. It came more boldly, with less finesse. Yet the dogs failed to notice it. The man that made it carried a gun. And he, too, took refuge in the shadow of the nearest tepee.

And neither of the night visitors was aware of the presence of the other.

The second man worked his way along the line of tepees, following the course Blue Pete had taken. He reached the curve in the line and went on. He did not so much as glance toward the chief's tepee or he might have seen the figure still crouched there. His attention was fixed rather on a tepee farther along the line and in the other row. He moved now without a sound.

Unsuspecting, Blue Pete continued to crouch and plan his course. For once his warning sense slept, he was too intent on the tepee before him, too thrilled with the thing he had come to do.

The other passed on.

Blue Pete shifted his position. He had the arrangement of the tepee in his mind now, he thought. Squatted close to the skins, he drew a knife from his

pocket. The razor-like point he placed against the skin wall close to his face and paused.

Listening now, tense, aware that something was happening for which he was unprepared, he dismissed it with a shrug. With the awareness was no sense of impending danger. Whatever it was offered no threat, and that was all that mattered. Dogs? That could not be, for they would announce his presence with the cowardly howl and snarl of their kind, understood by every Indian within hearing. Humans? That, too, could scarcely be, for any human being there would surely mean real danger.

He had no time to figure it out, no time to lose. Gently he pressed on the knife. With the slightest of sounds it slit through the skin. Slowly it descended. With his other hand he held the bottom of the skin taut that the opening might not spread and let the outer light through. The knife moved on. It reached his other hand.

Slowly he pulled the ends apart and crept through into the dark interior.

CHAPTER XXV

FIGHTING AS FRIENDS

EUGENE THORÉAL, commonly called Frenchy about Medicine Hat, where he had won a varied reputation for himself, had few delusions about the danger that surrounded him anywhere he moved. The Mounted Police were after him, sooner or later they would overtake him. That is, if another little band did not overtake him first.

Now it was the other little band that held his attention.

But to clear the way for it he had other scores to settle, and he set about attending to them without delay, that was the sort of man he was. And so, with every sense alert, but lacking the instinctive caution of the half-breed, he approached the encampment through the dark forest, bent on a little job that would haunt him until it was completed.

As he moved soundlessly along from tree to tree he never once thought of Blue Pete.

He had come with little hope that things would turn out so favourably. There were the dogs, for instance. Could he be certain of allaying their suspicions? He had hopes. He had lived among them for some weeks not long before, and he was now as then disguised as an Indian. Perhaps the Indian blood in him might even deceive their sensitive noses. At any rate he was prepared to take the risk. With a gun he had nothing to fear.

He wondered as he went along that he met none of them. Where were they? Of course it was a cold night, they would be curled in their tails. But not

even one was in sight. It struck him a little uncomfortably, an uncanny silence.

He reached a tepee beyond the circle about the chief's tepee. There he remained for some time, staring through the moonlight across the lighted path that extended down the middle of the camp between the rows. On a tepee across in the other line his eyes were fixed, and the look in them was anything but friendly. His right hand clutched at the gun as an expression of his hatred.

For there, beyond that shaft of moonlit clearing the man he had come to kill lay probably sleeping, unaware of how close he was to death. Leaping Rabbit, the informer, the Indian who had struck him, the one whom Blue Pete had freed almost at the moment of retribution, was going now to pay. Eugene Thoreau had been struck in the face when he was helpless. And Eugene Thoreau always repaid an insult with interest.

He became conscious of the gun in his hand, and he held it before him, looking down on it doubtfully. Then, with a reluctant movement, he thrust it in his pocket and drew a long knife from his belt. As a former butcher he knew all about knives and how to use them.

A restless dog that had thrown itself down beyond Leaping Rabbit's tepee awakened and shivered. Thoreau caught the movement, and his teeth bared. Would the brute see him if he crossed the moonlit path? Would it bark at him and arouse the man he wished to reach in his sleep? In that case the silent knife would have to give place to the noisy gun, with all the attendant uncertainty, and danger that he might fail. Of danger to himself he did not think.

He had to take the chance. Boldly he moved out into the moonlight. The dog saw him the instant he

left the shadow of the tepee. But this was apparently an Indian, and in his movements was nothing furtive or threatening. The creature lay and watched without much interest. As Thoreau drew nearer it lifted its nose and whuffed at the air. The scent was familiar, it was satisfied. Lately it lumbered to its feet as Thoreau approached, and trotted out of the way.

Thoreau smiled with satisfaction.

Carefully he circled the tepee, making not a whisper of sound. Reaching the back he knelt on the ground. The knife was gripped firmly by the handle in his steady fingers. The canvas rose before him. And from beyond, only a few inches away, rose the steady breathing of a sleeping man. The fact outside in the moonlight twisted to a malevolent leer. The knife moved forward to the canvas.

At that moment a dog back in the shelter of the forest a dozen yards away raised its head and howled. The sound aroused a couple of its mates. A dog here and there rose and commenced to prowl. They came toward the crouching figure behind Leaping Rabbit's tepee. At a distance of three or four paces they stopped and barked. It was a bark that meant something to every Indian; it awakened.

As Thoreau hesitated, from the heart of the camp came a piercing scream—a shout of fear and a call for help.

Thoreau leaped to his feet. What did it mean? Nothing he had done could account for it. Even the barking of the dogs, significant as it was, would not induce such commotion, and at such a distance. As he stood, wondering what would happen next, the camp sprang to life. Running feet sounded along the path.

A shot rang out—another.

Thoreau ran around the tepee and unhesitatingly

joined the running Indians. In the moonlight he was one of them, unrecognized. From the path before him a gun spat into the night, and a bullet whistled near.

As a man the Indians dashed from the path to the shelter of the tepees. Thoreau did the same. But he did not stop there. Instead he ran on behind them. He was doubly curious now, and he had a feeling. From the shelter of the tepees several rifles banged an intermittent volley. From the other end of the camp, toward the prairie, more Indians were shooting.

Thoreau pulled up. He laughed.

"Gave 'em hell, Pete," he shouted. "I'm coming. You're shooting over their heads. Don't be an ass."

For he had seen a figure drop to the ground in the middle of the path. Immediately afterwards a gun flashed from the spot.

"If they're getting you cornered, Pete," he called, "I'll clear a way for you here."

An Indian moved around the tepee beyond him, and he fired toward it without taking aim. The Indian jumped out of sight. Thoreau backed against the tepee, watching both sides. A rifle spoke from the forest before him. It warned him that the Indians were working around him.

Darting into the path, he dropped beside Blue Pete. The half-breed pulled him lower.

"Git down, yuh dang fool."

"Here, we've got to get out of this," warned Thoreau. "What the hell are you doing here? You can't hope to do much against all this mob."

"I done wot I come fer," replied Blue Pete. "I got back my guns. Wot you done here? They want you's bad's they do me."

"Never mind about me. I'm getting you out of this. This is no time to revel in thrills. Haven't you an atom of sense?"

Blue Pete grumbled something unintelligible and started to creep away. Thoreau dragged him back.

"Not that way. The trees in that direction are full of Indians. It's this way—through the tepees on this other side."

A small band of dogs flashed across the path and both guns fired in rapid succession. Both laughed as only one of the dogs disappeared among the tepees.

"Bin waitin' fer a chance like that," Blue Pete gurgled. "Le's clear 'em all out wen we're at it."

But Thoreau was cool. He saw that to delay would mean almost certain death for both of them. A cloud touched the edge of the moon. His hand closed on the half-breed's arm and dragged him to his feet. They raced through the tepees and vanished into the trees beyond. Only then did Thoreau's grip relax.

"You said you got your guns?" he asked.

"Donchu know the sound o' my .45?" Blue Pete replied. "Yip-ee!" he yelled.

A volley of bullets thudded into the trees about them. Thoreau laughed.

"What a pair of damned fools we are!" he said. And in his voice was a note of longing and regret.

CHAPTER XXVI

SERGEANT MAHON RIDES

SERGEANT MAHON stalked from the dingy barracks at Medicine Hat with a heavy heart. He had no liking for the task Inspector Barker had set him. It was not the long, tiresome journey to the foothills, not the danger he knew he should face before once more dropping down into the hollow where the city lay, not even the fear of failure.

What he dreaded was what Blue Pete would think, how it would affect him.

They had always been such close friends, such understanding friends. In fair weather and foul—and their association had so often been closest in the latter—he had come to understand the half-breed as no one else except Mira. Inspector Barker thought he knew him, but their relations were always clouded with the necessity of discipline, of obeying the regulations, and the official mind floundered sometimes in the effort to reach the Indian mind that operated so disturbingly in the half-breed's tasks.

Mira had won. Inspector Barker worried for Blue Pete more than he cared to confess even to himself, and weighed down by the creed of what new heterodoxy Blue Pete might indulge in, had yielded to Mira's demand that the Sergeant be despatched to find out what had happened to her husband.

Doubtful as he was of the wisdom of the move, the Sergeant had to do what he was told. Unfortunately he had a vivid memory of the results of the same mission only a few weeks before to the same part of

the country. An Indian had been shot before his eyes, and he had been forced to bring his half-breed friend back under a charge of murder. To be sure the charge had failed with Inspector Barker's ready connivance—but the stain had remained between them.

Now, pursuing him once more, Blue Pete's resentment against interference might take some drastic form that would permanently injure their relations. Thoreau was Blue Pete's prey: he would be something more than angry when he knew what officialdom planned to do about it.

There had been a session of telephoning between Inspector Barker and Inspector Ridgeway of the Macleod detachment, so that this time Mahon would not go unheralded, avoiding his fellow officers. In the first place he would require a horse, and there was no telling how much help he might need before his quest was finished.

But in all their conversations nothing had been said of Blue Pete. There was a criminal, an outlaw, by name Eugene Thoreau, there somewhere in the foothills Inspector Barker had discovered. To undertake the task of running him down it was wise for one of his own men who knew the fellow to be selected for it. There were sure to be too many questions asked—and later, too many unconventionalities, if nothing worse to explain and apologise for—to risk mentioning the half-breed.

The night train from Medicine Hat carried the Sergeant down the Crow's Nest Railway to Macleod. In the morning, after little sleep, he disembarked at Macleod and sought the Mounted Police barracks.

He had hoped to get away from the officials there with little loss of time. He was not in the best of moods, and he feared that he might inadvertently

reveal something of what troubled him. In that hope he was baulked.

Inspector Ridgeway was glad to talk to a stranger to whom he might express himself freely. Besides, he was frankly curious. Where he could see readily enough the wisdom of Mahon undertaking the chase, there was, he had sensed, an incompleteness about his fellow-inspector's story—a hiatus in the narrative, that made him wonder. The Sergeant acquitted himself well, however, and he had begun to feel more secure when a Constable knocked at the office door and entered without waiting to be summoned.

He was plainly excited, and he did not even wait to be addressed by his superior.

'Word has just come through that Scarway has escaped,' he announced.

Inspector Ridgeway was instantly on his feet, asking questions, snapping orders. Scarway, it seemed, had been on his way to jail at Lethbridge, under guard. With the train at full speed he had leaped through an open window, and by the time the guard could get the door open to follow, he had vanished.

The Policeman rushed away to see that the Inspector's orders were carried out. The latter threw himself back in his chair biting his finger nails, flushed with shame and indignation. Mahon said nothing. The affair did not as yet concern him. Then he remembered something.

'Was that Bill Scarway, the Wyoming outlaw?' he asked. The warning that Scarway was wanted across the border and had probably headed for Canada had reached the Mounted Police throughout the West.

Inspector Ridgeway nodded. 'I knew he'd give us trouble before we were through with him. But someone's going to suffer for this. Constable Philips—that was he reported just now—he picked Scarway

up the other day after his horse had been creased under him. That was down near Pincher Creek. At least, he captured Scarway with assistance."

He winked and shook his head. He had a peculiar experience in connection with it. In fact he wouldn't have got the fellow at all if it hadn't been for a cross-eyed half-breed who happened to turn up at a fortunate moment. Phillips had Scarway in his hand, he thought, when the fellow shot at him. The bullet caught Phillips' horse on the shoulder and brought it down. Scarway would surely have got well away had the half-breed not run him down after doing some fancy shooting.

At the mention of a cross-eyed half-breed Sergeant Mahon's ears pricked up. The Inspector continued:

"A miserable little pinto the breed rode, together with a well-placed shot or two, did the trick. Between them they convinced Scarway that it was discreet to give up. He did."

"A half-breed, you say?" Mahon smiled. "It isn't often we get help from a breed. Who was he?"

"We don't know. Phillips had never seen him before. But he isn't one he'll ever forget now, he says, nor the pinto either. He didn't seem eager to talk, and Phillips had no reason to worry him after what he had done."

Mahon could have told him more about Blue Pete than anyone but his wife, but he had no thought of lifting the veil that shrouded him. Inwardly he laughed. Strange it was how Blue Pete managed to turn up at unexpected but opportune moments. He had managed so often to render help to the Mounted Police in that way, and not a cowboy or a rancher about Medicine Hat but expected to see him at the most embarrassing moments loping along on the ugly little pinto. It had made of him something of a wrath on the prairie. It was one reason for his unpopularity.

"What happened to him—the breed, I mean?" enquired the Sergeant casually.

The Inspector shrugged. He rode away, as mysterious at the last as at the first, but a damned good scout for us. None of my men have seen him since. He was making for the west. From what Phillips says I wish I had a few men who could shoot like him. By the way, if this Thorau is the shot you say he is, it's too bad you can't get the breed to go along with you. You may be in for some hot work.

He thought for a moment. "Are you sure you hadn't better take along a man of mine. I hate to think of you going alone into a strange country. And I'm none too sure of those Indians. Those footfalls are a maze of valleys and hills, and they're full of Indians. We can't get them to stick to their reserves. Do you speak Blackfeet?"

A little. "I can get along." The fact was that he knew only a little Blackfeet, but he had no intention of messing things up further by taking another Peace-man along as a companion. "I'd have a much better chance alone. I think Thorau is cunning. Two of us would look like an army to the Indians, and the word would get around. Our only chance with Thorau is to come on him unprepared and unarmed. Well," rising, "I'd be off. If you'd let me have that horse I'll start. I'd stop at some ranch to rig it. To-morrow I should reach the footfalls where the Indian encampments are, shouldn't I?"

The Inspector accompanied him to the stables and selected the horse.

"That's the very horse Phillips rode," he said. "There's the scar—where that white hair is. It wasn't bad, as you see. And if you run across that breed you might try to find out something about him. I'm not fond of breeds, they usually mean trouble."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SERGEANT PLANS

SERGEANT MAHON riding away to a disagreeable task, might have strengthened Inspector Ridgway's fear that wherever Blue Pete might be there was certain to be trouble even when his purpose was to do something for the Mounted Police. But in this latest escapade in which the half-breed had been involved was something to make the Sergeant smile. What he reflected would Inspector Ridgway have said if he had known that the breed who had brought about Scarway's capture was the same one who had once a few weeks before run off with a Mounted Police horse?¹

Of course, that would be kept strictly between themselves but he was unhappy with the memory of so many occasions when he had been forced to trim very narrowly the margin of disloyalty to his vows. The memory altered the amusement he felt at first, to angry impatience. He had long known what Blue Pete was like through every happening undisciplined, independent, impatient of control, unconventional in his ideas, keeping his eye fixed on his goal and not on the path he followed to reach it.

The horse the Sergeant rode was a fine animal. A lover of good horse flesh, he was especially interested in it as the one Constable Phillips had ridden when Blue Pete came to his aid. The white hairs of the healed scar from Scarway's bullet were scarcely visible, but to Sergeant Mahon they told an interesting story.

[¹ *Blue Pete Rides*.]

As the town fell behind them the horse dropped into a long, careless lope it had learned during its extended work on the prairie. Gallant was its name, and gallant the Sergeant was convinced it would be when put to the test. He was delighted with it.

That night he spent at a Mounted Police hut west of Puncher Creek. Since he was drawing near the foothills he made enquiries of the Policeman stationed there. Thornton, he discovered, was officially unknown in that quarter, but the Policeman had heard of the capture of Scarway. His escape was a surprise.

I've sometimes wondered, said the Policeman, if he was responsible for the rustling that's been going on here around the foothills. The ranchers have told us almost nothing about it as yet, they hate to admit that it's due to their own carelessness, and they're always hoping the cattle may have wandered. Scarway, however, seems to be alone. I don't believe a single man could be responsible for the stock that's been rustled. The JAC ranch has missed one of its best broncos, too.

Odd thing about it now, he added, frowning at the floor, is that much of the stock that was thought to have been rustled has returned. And the manner of the return is one of its curious features. The Pitchfork, and the Turkey Track and the JAC claim all their cows have come back. I bet even too that Saffron of the Currier R is satisfied though he won't talk. I've been wondering if he won't be increasing something. I did manage to drag from him that the chap he knew had got after the rustled herd and recaptured it. A half-breed, he said."

Sergeant Mahon controlled himself, he was prepared for almost anything now. Blue Pete—always Blue Pete, wherever he turned.

'Did the Circle R man know anything about him—the half-breed I mean?'

'He would only say that he had met him accidentally and had engaged him to run the rustled cattle down Stranger's so, because I don't know any breeds about here I'd trust in sight of cattle let alone a rustled herd. You know the breed as well as I do. I wouldn't trust one.'

'I would! just one' said Mahon. But even as he said it he questioned its unquestioned truth.

'I can't believe it was the Indians,' the Policeman continued. 'I think we have them too badly scared to attempt anything like that. But of course, one can't be certain. One of these days I'm due to pay a visit to the foothills camps and pay about a lot though they're running enough to cover their trails. We have to run in now and then to make them remember we're still on the job. Most of them are too damned lazy nowadays to rustle.'

Mahon said nothing more. Early next morning he rode away, still enquiring about the ranches toward the foothills. Towards evening he came within sight of the water tower about the Circle R ranch buildings and rode through the gate. He had planned all along to spend the night there, but now that the ranch house was in sight he experienced a keen reluctance to learn more about Blue Pete's activities. So far as he knew yet his friend had done nothing to disapprove of, but experience warned him that something shocking was due. Suffron seemed to be the last one to have come in contact with the half-breed, and the fact that the Policeman had been impressed with his reluctance to speak must mean that there was something to tell that would not sound well in the ears of the Mounted Police.

Why Blue Pete had dropped the job he had under-

taken, and had taken on such an unconnected one as running down a rustled herd he could not imagine. Unless it was another of his avid hunts for excitement. What bearing would it have on his pursuit of Thoreau? Was his heart so little in that task that any distraction was welcome? What had Suffron been able to offer him to turn him from it?

Excitement—danger—that must have been the attraction. Blue Pete had no need of money, no use for it. And now what had Suffron to tell him?

Suffron was not at home when he arrived, but his wife welcomed the Sergeant warmly. Her husband, she said, was sure to be back before dark. He was riding now more than usual, because rustling had broken out, but he never failed to return for the night.

While she was speaking, Suffron rode into view beyond the wire fence. He saw the pair beside the house, and waved his sombrero at the same time urging his mount to a faster pace. In a couple of minutes he dropped from his horse beside them. Mahon he recognized instantly. Only a few weeks before the Sergeant had stopped at the ranch with Blue Pete to pick up the horse the half-breed had left there, the Mounted Police horse to which he had helped himself.

"Hello, hello, Sergeant!"

"Good day, Mr. Suffron."

Suffron's eyes fixed themselves on the Sergeant's horse. Say, isn't that the nag that breed had here a few weeks ago? I'm sure it is.

Mahon had not thought of that. On that occasion he had seen the horse only a short time in the daylight and beyond the fact that he knew Blue Pete had stolen it, had paid little attention to it. It was something of a shock, therefore, to learn that the same horse had carried him from Macleod.

Suffron went on without waiting for an answer.

"You must have something I haven't. I couldn't induce him to part with the beast. You remember I asked him to name his own price, but he just wouldn't consider a deal. I'm damned envious of you. He shook his head. If I hadn't seen the breed lately I'd conclude you'd run him in and taken his horse. Now he's astride a miserable little pinto. No, not miserable, it's the last of most any arying little brute I ever saw. Lord, it ran off on me and left me cold."

"Oh, we managed to make a deal," replied Mahon.

But I wish you'd promise not to speak of it to anyone. There's a story, of course, and the breed and I want it kept quiet. We're both satisfied.

That damned breed. Suffron pushed his hat back with an irrittable movement, gets curiouser and curiouser every time I hear anything about him. But it's none of my business. He did me a good turn, and if talking about a horse would get him into trouble I'm mum. But let's get the animals away and enjoy ourselves. It's going to be a cool night. He paused to look away toward the mountain peaks far in the west. But it's not going to snow or storm. We'll probably not have any more snow till December. That storm of a few weeks ago, you've reason to remember it, gave us a fine taste of what this country can do when it settles down to it.

In a few minutes they were seated before a glowing fireplace. Suffron had replaced his riding boots with soft rubber slippers, and his ankles twisted comfortably as he held them to the heat. Mrs. Suffron was busy in the kitchen with the maid. From upstairs came the daughter's voice raised in cheerful song.

Suffron sighed and relaxed.

"Not much of the pioneer life about this," he laughed, "once you're indoors. Except for the post

office and the stores and the schools and the churches we're as cosy as if we were back in England, cover in many respects . . . and a damned sight healthier and happier . . . And until lately there seemed nothing to worry about."

"'Lately'?" questioned the Sergeant. "What has happened now?"

"The blight of the ranges, rusting. We've escaped it for years, and now it's broken out again." He sat with his chin on his breast, staring into the leaping flames. "I'm all right yet, just by good fortune. That breed got things straightened out for us."

He raised his eyes abruptly to the Sergeant. "I'm curious. What in the world brings you here again? You're not with the Macleod detachment. Aren't you off your beat. Of course," smiling a little apologetically. "I know you won't tell me a damned thing, but somehow I connect you with that breed. I'm interested in him. I owe him a nice bunch of cows. . . Yet he wouldn't take a penny for getting them back."

"I heard what he'd done for you," said Mahon. "You were lucky, indeed. But how did you get him to work for you?"

Suffron waved a lump hand. "Don't ask me how or why I did anything with him. I don't know the answers. I happened to run on him when I was riding around. I told him what was going on. He thought about it for a few minutes, then he offered to get the cows back. He said it fitted into another job he had in hand. I've no idea what he meant." He sighed. "Every time I meet him he leaves me in a deeper flounder than ever."

"Did he tell you where he got the cows, or how, or who the rustlers were?" An idea began to form in Mahon's mind. "Fitting in with another job he had."

ainted a rather complete picture of what had happened.

"He wouldn't tell me a damned thing. But he'd been over in Montana. In fact, with a laugh, he brought back some Montana cows with him. Wanted me to take them off his hands. When I refused he was huffed, he just up and drove them away without waiting to be paid. It wasn't money for himself he wanted, either, but for a couple of Indians he said had helped him for a day or two. When I wouldn't accept the Montana bunch he refused to take even pay for the Indians. He's a funny cuss.

"You haven't seen or heard of him since?"

"Not a sign or a word. I even offered to hire him—I could do with a man like that—but he wouldn't consider it. I imagine he'd be the devil to handle, and perhaps I'm lucky he didn't take my offer.

Sergeant Mahon could have assured him on that score. He thought for a time. Suddenly he asked:

"Do you speak the Blackfoot language?"

Suffron laughed. "What makes you ask that? It's the one new accomplishment I've attained since I came and lived a rather useless life."

"Then you can be useful to me."

The rancher looked him over gravely. "Going in among the Blackfeet, are you? What's the —. But I suppose I mustn't ask questions. He stared into the fire, evidently considering the Sergeant's suggestion. "If you want me to go with you I'll say, yes. But I don't like the Indians. I don't trust them. I'm even a bit afraid of them. There isn't a thing they wouldn't do if they could get away with it."

"And it's you chaps who frighten them into not trying. I've often wanted to have a look at them in their own homes. Thanks for the opportunity. I'll go and interpret for you."

CHAPTER XXVIII

BLUE PETE GETS HIS GUNS

SAFE among the trees, Blue Pete and Thoreau separated, avoiding each other as zealously as they had the Indians. Behind them they could hear the latter searching for them, now and then firing their rifles, either at shadows or to bolster their own courage.

As they parted Thoreau laughed aloud. The sound of it angered the half-breed. Here they were once more standing side by side against a common foe, repeating situations where their promise to shoot each other was impossible of fulfilment. Something was wrong somewhere. Fate played them a scurvy trick, a succession of them. Their hands were bound, once more they must wait for the opportunity they both sought so eagerly.

His helplessness increased his bitterness against Frenchy. The law cropped up only at moments when he either had to be rescuer or the rescued. And it hurt Blue Pete to think that no one was needed to rescue him. All his life he had trusted to his own wits and his own gun. Now all that was changed. And the man who changed it was the one he had spent all this effort to capture or kill. Would the time never come when their feud would be settled, when one or the other would emerge from the fight that must come, with the satisfaction of knowing that he was the better man, when victorious, he himself might leave the district for good and return to the prairie that he knew so well and loved?

As he ran along through the darkness, glints of moonlight flashing in isolated spots on the ground among the trees he suddenly longed to get away. He had always hated the heights, he hated now the foothills, with their unaccustomed hills and hollows, their unfriendly Indians, their memories of disturbing scenes of violence where he had need of a protector.

Mira came before his mind's eye—the 3-Bar-Y, the Cypress Hills that were so different from the foothills—herds scattered over the open prairie. But over all was Mira.

He commenced to figure the time he had been away from her. It must be two weeks. He had no way of keeping track of the days, for there were no Sundays in his calendar. Time was reckoned on events—and there had been so many of them since he left Medicine Hat.

Mira, he knew, would be troubled. She would wonder and worry. She always worried when he was away from her on his secret official tasks. And often her worry took a practical form. More than once it had brought her in search of him, and always she had found him in time of special danger and stress. That meant danger to her as well.

He commenced to worry about that. Would she set out to find him, as she had a few weeks before when he had faced the task of recovering his 45 from Grey Coyote? It would be more dangerous for her now in the foothills, for the Indians were in an ugly mood. Not that she could not take care of herself. She had been brought up in the West, and she could ride and shoot and throw a rope with any man. But she was unfamiliar with conditions in the foothills, and her contempt for the Indians might well leave her unprepared for what she would have to face.

He remembered their last few days together. Time and again she had spoken of her anxiety for him in the chase he was about to undertake. And always she regretted that he should find it in him to run down a man who had saved his life so often. What would she think now when Thoreau had come to his rescue several times more? She always had the better of any argument between them. He could not argue with her, before her he was dumb, awed by his good fortune in having her for his wife, and by his love of her.

That Thoreau had saved his life had no bearing whatever with him on the purpose he had set out to carry through. His job was to see that Thoreau's rustling ended for good, and the one way to effect that was to put him out of the way. In theory that—but the fact was that in his mind was only the desire that Thoreau's end should come as the climax of a fair and square stand-up fight with guns.

He knew there would be no great sense of triumph, no glory, in victory. That was partly because of Mira's feeling in the matter, partly because he found it impossible, except at moments of irritation, to develop any dislike of his victim. In so many ways they were alike—their mixed blood, their outlook on life, their accomplishments, their dislike of the Indians, their hankering for supremacy in the perils that beset them.

Automatically he turned eastward. Somewhere in that direction among the thicker growth, he had left Whiskers. And this time, to make certain that, disturbed by the shooting he knew was apt to result from his expedition, she should not wander into trouble, he had looped the reins about a tree and tied them. She had complained with an accusing necker, but he had closed his ears to it.

She heard him coming and welcomed him with a different sort of nicker. He rubbed her ears as he untied the reins.

'I ain't fair. I know it, ole gal,' he murmured, "but you is me's in a new sorta country now an' we gotta be extra keetlus. An' I ain't much use to yuh, 'cause I don't know wot's goin' to happen nohow."

"I don't even know wot I'm goin' to do next," he added. "An' I ain't on y' Frenchy, it's them darn Niggers. But I reckon we don't need to worry so much now I got such see-shooters."

He did not take time to tell her how he had got them. But the memory of his experiences in the chief's tepee brought a smile to his dark face.

The part of the tepee through which he hoped to cut his way to where he would find the chief asleep had not been well chosen. From his memory of the night spent here in the stage in another part of the tepee he had visualized where he thought the chief slept. But his knife had slit the skins a little to the east. This he had no way of knowing. If crawling through he stuck in the darkness and silence. It was the downward side of the tepee; no light reached the sector where he entered. The slit skins he had drawn behind him so that neither light nor draught should awaken anyone sleeping within.

For a time he could see nothing, though his eyes were almost as keen as a wild cat's in the dark. But he could hear, and he had learned to trust his ears.

What he heard surprised him. It was not the deep breathing of the sleeping chief that reached his ears, but the lighter sound of two other sleeping forms, probably squaws. For a time he waited to make sure. Was the chief there awake and holding his breath, biding the time to strike? The uncertainty of it acted almost as that sixth sense that always warned him of

danger, and the thought flashed through him that he had better escape while the way was open. But he would not draw back now until some more immediate threat hung over him.

Satisfied at last that the chief was not there, he reached out. His groping hand touched a skin wall and he edged toward it, avoiding the sleeping squaws. He moved without a sound for in there the ground was not covered with boughs but with skins alone. If the chief was not in this room he must be there beyond that skin wall.

Gradually he worked his way along it, feeling for an opening. His hand touched a loose flap and he pushed it aside and listened. The blood pounded to his head when he heard what he sought—the deep breathing of a man. He chuckled, of course. Carefully he crept through, fixing his mind on the location of the opening in case he had to retreat in haste.

In there it was lighter for the moon struck part of the outer wall where the skins were thin. Blue Pete's eyes roamed over the enclosed space. Vaguely he made out the mound in the corner next the partition, that must be the sleeping chief. The Indian had chosen the inner wall as far removed from the outside as possible. His feet extended slightly across the opening to the room where the squaws slept. Only by chance had the half breed avoided them.

Against another partition, toward the front of the teepee stood a seat. On top of it was a heap, irregular in shape, tempting to explore. Blue Pete yielded to the temptation. His hand slid over the heap. His two guns! And leaning beside the seat was his rifle. The guns he thrust in his belt, he grasped the rifle. A broad grin creased his face. It was all so easy.

But what he had not seen, what altered the situation in a flash, was that another rifle leaned against

his own. As he moved his rifle the other fell sideways. It struck full on the chief's shoulder.

There was a swift movement, a shout for help. In the darkness Blue Pete struck out with his fist toward where he thought the shouting man's face would be, but the blow glanced from a shoulder. Already the squaws in the adjoining room were screaming at the top of their voices. In another moment the camp would be on him.

He did not hesitate. With a leap he threw his great body against the outer wall of the tepee. He hoped that the stitches in the skins would give way. They did, but not before the whole structure came crashing to the ground, burying them all in its smothering folds.

But the ropes to the stakes, a special addition to the chief's tepee, gave way, and he managed to roll through, leaving the chief to fight against the full weight of skins and poles. Picking himself up, he looked about for the best avenue to safety.

He could hear the Indians coming in answer to their chief's shouts, and he ran in the one direction where they appeared as yet not to be aroused. As he fled along the path between the two rows of tepees he heard Indians before him, Indians behind, and on both sides. Angered, shamed at the thought of running before them, he dropped flat in a slight depression in the path. The moon had come out from behind a cloud, and he could see the Indians now. His first inclination was to shoot them down as they ran, but something held his hand, and he fired over their heads.

They had him cornered now, however; he could not flee in any direction. They were firing at him from all about him. He laughed. Very well, he could wait there till daylight. He would shoot to kill them—if he lasted that long. It would be self-defence. At any

rate, he had his guns. His veins tingled with elation and excitement.

Then Thoreau joined him. A crazy night. Thoreau always Thoreau! And with Thoreau's coming he knew that without him he would probably never have escaped. He lay down beside Whalers and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX

FRENCHY FACES A GUN

AS he ran off in the other direction Frenchy continued to laugh. The crazy breed! What would he be up to next? How often again would it be necessary to be on hand to rescue him from situations into which his recklessness and daring carried him? What an engaging sort of chap he was!

And to think that some day they were going to shoot it out and end the absorbing succession of escapades in which they became mutually involved! Men with so much in common, so much respect for each other's prowess with no definite enmity between them forced to kill each other to settle a sly rivalry!

He remembered then that he had been foiled in the purpose of his night visit to the camp, the second time Blue Pete had balked him, and he stopped and turned to face the shouts of the pursuing Indians. Should he return? Perhaps in the hubbub he might accomplish his purpose. But better judgment prevailed and he started away. Leaping Rabbit might wait for a more auspicious time. Some day he would pay for what he had done. Thoreau had his mind made up to that and there would be no relenting.

He commenced to climb. His bronco he had left over the height in the next valley, and he made for it. But where he would go then he had no idea. The camp behind him he must avoid. And in a few days,

when the news spread, perhaps every other camp in the foothills would be closed to him. It would make life more difficult if he decided to remain.

If he decided to remain. Foolish, but he knew he would remain. That little account with Blue Pete had to be settled there. And the settlement of that was more vital than even comfort and safety. When he had had it out with the half-breed he might hide somewhere across the border. It would take the Mounties some time to ferret him out.

Suddenly he felt desperately tired. For days he had lived under a tremendous strain, had slept little. Now, with danger well behind him momentarily, he felt that he could go on no longer without sleep. Finding a spot thick with pine needles, he curled up and slept.

The sun breaking through an opening in the trees, awakened him. He sat up and looked vaguely about. For a time he could not locate himself, remembered only as a black disturbing shadow that something had happened just before he went to sleep. He had been more fatigued than he imagined, and he had slept longer and more deeply than was his wont. He had no watch, for the Indians had taken everything of value from him. The revolver he carried he had cached long ago in the forest against the possibility of needing it, and the rifle he had taken from Leaping Rabbit before trying to hang him.

By the height of the sun he realized that it must be near noon, and he sprang to his feet oppressed with the feeling that valuable time had been wasted, that things of supreme importance to him had transpired while he slept.

The feeling persisted, even increased, as he hurried down through the trees into the next valley, making for the spot where he had left his horse.

It was this feeling that made him move with unusual care. There was nothing in sight to alarm him, yet he knew that things were not as he had left them. His bronco he had tied to a tree in a thicket. By a roundabout way he approached it. Something, he was convinced, was wrong. So heavily did the thought weigh on him that reaching an evergreen whose boughs spread almost to the ground, he wormed his way among them and looked about. But he could see nothing and still unsatisfied, he commenced to climb. Twenty feet above the ground he seated himself on a limb, screened by the foliage and set himself to make a more minute inspection of the forest about him.

For twenty minutes nothing happened. Not so much as a bird made its existence known. That in itself was a warning. Then, to the east, near the fringe of the forest before the open line of the valley, a movement caught his eye. So quickly did it disappear that he had no time to focus on it, but he had seen enough to know that a horse was somewhere there.

The pinto? Blue Pete? But the brown patch he had seen was no part of the pinto. He riveted his eyes on the spot and waited.

Again a movement, but this time in a different direction and instinctively his hand reached around to unslung the rifle from his back. For it was not a horse now but the yellow slash down the seams of a pair of riding breeches, the brown of a Stetson with a pointed crown, the khaki of the uniform of the Mounted Police!

His teeth bared and he held the rifle poised, waiting for another glimpse. It came. It was perhaps two hundred yards away, well within range, a target he was little likely to miss. The rifle pointed

But he did not shoot. As his finger touched the trigger something held it. Like shooting a sitting bird, or ambushing a foe. There would be only shame in a hit.

The Policeman crept on upward through the trees and disappeared. Slowly the rifle sank to Thoreau's knees.

He cursed. He cursed himself. So the Mounted Police had discovered where he had taken refuge and were on a trail they would never quit till he was captured or shot. By all the rules of his kind he would have been just tied in shooting, in knocking off every Mounted Policeman who crossed his path. That was mere self-defence. Yet the argument failed to convince him. Outlaw that he was, ruthless on occasion, his idea of self-defence was more complicated than that, it called for more immediate danger. To Eugene Thoreau there would be no satisfaction from shooting his worst enemy in the back.

He thought of Blue Pete, and a wry smile twisted his face. Difficulty threatened in that case. Even as victory in their contest, that would see one of them die, he foresaw no action, no sense of triumph.

But how had the Mounted Police traced him? Blue Pete? He did not believe the half-breed would tell. That he had not seemed to be proven by the fact that the half-breed himself had come to pick up the trail again. And Thoreau knew how much he resented interference.

It was all pretty much of a puzzle. But all that mattered for the time being was that another foe had to be added to the list, another against whom he must protect himself. Life was growing complicated.

He had made up his mind to descend and find his horse when another man came suddenly into view below him. It was a cowboy judging by his dress—

a stranger. Cautiously he crept through the trees. Then they swallowed him.

Curious and not a little resentful at this intrusion into his retreat, Thoreau climbed down and set off to find what it was all about. Several times he caught fleeting glimpses of the man he followed and each glimpse warned him that the cowboy was bent on something worth watching. From tree to tree he slunk, from thicket to thicket, and all the time his attention was fixed on something before him that Thoreau could not see.

It was from somewhere there ahead that the Mounted Policeman had come. Were there other Policemen? But no—had that been so the cowboy would have been speeding the other way. A glimpse of his hard, brutal face was assurance of that.

Then he saw what the cowboy must have seen. A man stood at the margin of the forest. Near him two horses were tied to trees. Nervously the man paced about, stopping every few moments to peer off up the slope in the direction the Policeman had taken. By his dress he was not a Policeman himself, but the equipment of one of the horses proved it to belong to the Mounted Police—the whitened rope cut a startling slash across the dark shadows of the trees.

The cowboy, too, had come to a stop. He lay now under cover of a low-growing evergreen, peering through its branches. A cruel face, reckless, vicious. Thoreau almost unconsciously drew his gun. With the utmost caution he crept forward until he lay only thirty yards away. He could hit a button at that distance.

The man with the horses plainly suspected nothing definite. Yet he was uneasy. No Policeman that, for he appeared unaccustomed to the situation in which he found himself. Once he paused in his pacing and

lit a cigarette, and his hand shook. And after a few puffs he dropped the cigarette and stamped it out.

The cowboy continued to watch. No gun was visible about him, so that he offered no immediate threat to the man he watched.

Thoreau was puzzled. Something was about to happen, but what it was he could not guess.

The guard with the horse grew more impatient. Finally he set off up the hill along the route the Mounted Policeman had taken.

He had scarcely disappeared when the cowboy rose and ran toward the horses. He reached out to one of the reins as if to untie it. Thoreau had followed. He stepped into the open, toying with his gun. He laughed.

At the sound the man whirled a hand flying to a pocket. Thoreau's gun whipped up and pointed.

"Better not touch it, stranger. I take no chances with strangers till I know what they're about. In your case I'm damned curious. I'm something of an old-timer in these parts, and I've never seen you before. And seeing you now fails to prepossess me in your favour. White men don't come into these parts for any good. What's your particular ambition?"

The cowboy's hand had dropped away. He stared at Thoreau who, dressed and stained as an Indian, did not speak like one. Like most white men he held the Indians in contempt, but about this one there was something that warned him to be careful. In a way he was frightened.

But he spat deliberately, insultingly.

"Mebbe ya're right. Yu'd otta know. Differences between us is I'm not tugged up like a damned Indian. I take my chances as a white man anywhere I go. Seems you dassent."

"No?" For a moment or two Thoreau's anger flamed. "The reason for that is none of your damned business. Just take it from me that I came to find peace. As a white man I wouldn't find it here where there are others besides Indians. Neither will you."

The cowboy waved a thumb up the hillside. "Call the Mountie an Indian? Ya seen him?"

"I did. I've no warmer welcome for a Mountie than I have for you."

"I'd like to shoot the whole damned caboodle of them," snarled the cowboy. He looked Thoreau over with a new interest. "You 'n' me's in the same boat. I reckon, both keepin' outa the Mounties' way."

Thoreau shook his head. "In one way you're right, but to put us in the same boat hasn't go down easily with me. I don't like the cut of your face. I don't care for anything about you. What's your special quarrel with the Mounties?"

The man scowled, and his hand raised toward his pocket. But Thoreau's gun held steadily on him.

"It don't matter none to me whachu like or don't like. I'll say I ain't stuck on you neither. Sure I'm out with the Mounties. They had me over, but I beat 'em to it. Took a chance and jumped the train. Got a face full o' cinders down' it, but it worked. See that?" He turned one side of his face, it was dotted with black specks.

"What were you planning to do with those horses?" Thoreau inquired.

"If I'd had a rifle I'd have plugged that damned Mountie, but with a revolver I dassent risk gettin' close enough. When I turn them horses loose and stampee 'em that Mountie will have a damned long walk home. . . . and things are apt to happen on a long walk like that. I'd see to that," he added, with a nasty leer.

Thorau looked him over scornfully. "You mean you'd waylay him, you'd ambush him?"

"I don't care whatchu call it. He wouldn't get home, I bet."

Thorau shook his head and sighed. "I suppose there are men like you. They don't make life any happier even for themselves. I didn't like you from the first—now you're just a rat, a dirty low rat. No, don't try anything. I could shoot one of those cinders from your cheek and I'd be rather glad to feel I had to do it. The rules don't hold for rats like you. I confess I've no love for the Mounties, but when I shoot it's not going to be through the back. I'm funny that way, I suppose—but I can't help it. I didn't follow you with any idea of inculcating you with a reverence for ordinary decency, because, looking at you, I realize how impossible it would be. You don't know the meaning of the word. Just the same, for the moment I'm going to enforce a principle. I'll sleep better to-night with the memory of one rogue balked. Move on, brother, move on, and make it snappy. That man up there is bound to——"

He had turned as he spoke, to glance up the hill where the guard had gone, and his vigilance had relaxed.

"Drop that gun an' put 'em up!" snapped the cowboy.

He had drawn and pointed in the flashing moment when Thorau's eyes had moved.

Thorau nodded. His gun slowly sank. His face creased to a smile.

"I'll say this for you, stranger—you've a mighty quick hand. You seem to know what a gun's for besides shooting a man in the back. I hold that to your credit, it's the one credit mark you have with me to date. Yes, I was careless. I'm not that way

as a rule, but I got tired looking at that ugly face of yours. I'm apt to be too confident of my prowess with the six-shooter. I usually get away with it."

"Yu shuda knowed the fe,juh yu had to deal with," sneered the cowboy. "Bill Scarway always gets through little things like this with a whole skin. You may have ideas about decency an' all that silly stuff, but it's the man with the gun an' the quick hand that lasts the longest. Yu shouldn't —"

"'Bill Scarway? Bill Scarway?'" Thoreau squinted thoughtfully. "I don't seem to recall the name. You must be from across the line."

"I am, damn yu. You lousy Canucks thought yu'd get Bill Scarway like yu done to some more, but I fooled yu all round. They tried it in Wyoming an' Montana an' Dakoty. Nobody's done it yet. An you're not goin' to neither. I'm goin' to settle your hash right now. I bin takin' too much in this country. I'm goin' to get even a bit now."

He walked nearer, gun pointing steadily. His face was twisted with fury.

Thoreau smiled. "You'd better think twice before shooting a gun here. That Mountie will hear you. A shot carries a long way in this air. If you have a knife now —and I let you use it —"

One of the horses nickered eagerly. Scarway whirled. Like a flash Thoreau's gun jerked upward, and he leaped behind a tree. Too late the cowboy turned. Then he, too, rushed off among the trees.

A rifle shot rang out. But it did not come from Thoreau. And like a flash Thoreau disappeared. For several minutes the forest was silent. Then Blue Pete came into view. He made for the horses. From one of the saddles he cut a parcel and a moment later was gone.

CHAPTER XXX

BLUE PETE AGAIN

BLUE PETE, too, had slept late. He was awakened by Whiskers nuzzling against his cheek. He sat up, dazed a little by the length and depth of his unconsciousness. Whiskers regarded him disapprovingly, and he laughed and rubbed her nose.

He was desperately hungry and thirsty. The latter he might quench at the stream flowing through the valley below him—that is, if he cared to take the risk. But the Indian encampment was located higher up along its shores, and he knew what that would do to the water. Hunger there appeared no chance to satisfy except at some Indian camp, and the one nearest he dare not approach under any condition, unless he was prepared to shoot it out with the whole tribe once more.

He had often been hungry, so that he was more hardened to it. For water he must find some other stream. In the valley behind him, he seemed to remember, another stream ran, a very small one. And the valley was too narrow for an Indian settlement. He decided to make for it.

But first he made his way down to the edge of the trees below him and carefully looked along the valley in which there had been so much excitement the previous night. Not an Indian was in sight. But they were probably engaged in the reconstruction of the chief's tepee. It would occupy their lazy energies for days to come.

Accordingly he set off back up the hillside toward the valley to the south where he hoped to quench his thirst. Whiskers trailed behind, nosing him along, for she too was thirsty.

As he climbed he thought of the incidents of the night before and finally curiosity had its way. Turning back toward the west, he reached a point in the forest from which he was able to look down on the camp. He chuckled at what he saw. The chief's toper lay flat on the ground, a mass of tangled poses and torn skins. About it the braves were gathered, some made the chief squatted several squaws busy wiping the tears. The chief moved irritably through the crowd, evidently trying to greater speed. From his manner it was apparent that his dignity has been shamed, his pride hurt, and he was taking it out on his followers.

The half breed watched for only a few minutes, then turned back to where he had left Whiskers and commenced once more to climb. This time he kept edging to the west. If his memory was wrong and the next valley was occupied he must get about it to reach the stream uncontaminated.

He rounded over the height and started down the other side. Here the forest was much thicker so that Whiskers had difficulty in following him. Near the bottom where the trees ended he left the path and went on alone. When he had come on to the valley a growth filled the hollow but through it ran the stream, a tinkling little affair that later broadened and found a more open channel toward the prairie.

Whiskers waited a week or so for Whiskers, and together they satisfied their thirst. Feeling better, he was more conscious of hunger.

"Yuh got one on me ole gal," he told the pinto. "Yuh kin grub anywhere. I gotta grate about an' find wot it don't look like I'm goin' to eat. Less I

raid a camp. An I got 'nuff Neches down on me now 'thout gittin' the hull gang on mah neck. I cud party near tubble at mah chaps now, the way I feel." He sighed. "Oh, wal, I ain't beat yit, eh, old gal?"

Whiskers expressed her agreement by nodding her head.

Food and Frenchy mingled in his plans. Where the latter would be there would be food as well for Therian was not one to starve for long when every Indian encampment held the wherewithal to satisfy him. What he could not acquire without trouble he would take, trouble or not. Frenchy had come in this direction, he would make for the next camp. That the half breed remembered would be in the next valley to the south, over another height. He set off toward it.

But as he climbed the opposite slope his feet dragged. A feeling that he was working too fast, having a course without sufficient consideration, turned him halfily toward the east to range along the hillside above the narrow valley he had just left. Twice he sought to go on toward the south but each time he found his feet impeded by a curious nagging impulse not to leave so hurriedly where he was.

Living as he did under so many crowding joys he has become accustomed to yielding to such impulses, and always he found them well founded. And so he stopped now to consider the situation. Seating himself on a fallen trunk, he tried to reason out what was happening to him.

As he sat his eyes wandered vaguely down across the valley toward the slope he had just left. Through the trees he could see patches of it.

Suddenly he slipped behind the log and crouched. Over the top he peered his eyes wide and startled. A single swift glance he threw over his shoulder to make certain that Whiskers was well concealed.

A minute or two of tense watching, then he crept back to the punto and took his rifle from the holster. With this in his hands he lay down once more behind the log.

It was Thoreau he had seen. Frenchy was creeping through the trees of the opposite slope, evidently stalking something or somebody. Now and then the thickets and trunks of trees concealed him, but always he reappeared, making in the same direction.

Blue Pete's eyes flew before him. For a time he could not see what Thoreau was trailing. Then another man came into view. He was down near the edge of the trees. A cowboy by his dress. And he too crept cautiously along. It explained Thoreau, but what was the cowboy after? Blue Pete could see nothing to account for it. The horses were not visible from where he lay.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation. Bill Scarway! Bill Scarway, the outlaw he had helped the Mounted Policeman to capture only a few days before! But how could Scarway be there now? The Mounties were not likely to let him off so easily. They would surely have put him where he would harm no one for a long time. Something must have happened, something that boded ill for the Mounted Police if for no one else.

And now Scarway trailed something. Or someone!

Blue Pete slipped back through the trees and hurried down the slope.

He came in sight of the two men again after Thoreau had made his presence known. The pair were talking. From a safe distance the half breed watched. He could not hear what was said for he dare not advance nearer. But he had no need to hear. Thoreau had Scarway covered.

Suddenly the scene altered. As Thoreau turned to wave up the slope, his attention for the moment off

Scarway, the half-breed saw what was going to happen. Scarway flashed his gun and now had Thoreau helpless.

Thoughtlessly, in his surprise Blue Pete stood up. A horse he had not seen whinnied. With a muttered curse he recognized the note of welcome, it must be the horse he had stolen from the Mounted Police. What in the world?

He raised his head. The scene had altered once more. Thoreau had disappeared. The half-breed waited for a time, then stepped into the open. Scarway saw him and with a glare of hatred dashed away into the trees.

Blue Pete waited once more. The two men were gone. But the two horses were now in sight, and one was certainly the Police horse. To the cantle of each saddle was tied a parcel. His mouth watered.

Recklessly he ran toward them. The Police horse whinnied again and reached its nose to him. He had already commenced to untie the parcel on its saddle when he changed his mind and took the other instead.

But as he ran away, so hungry that he broke the cord about the parcel without slowing his pace, he wondered about that horse. So a Mountie had come to the foothills. Why?

CHAPTER XXXI

BLUE PETE MEETS A FOX

A WAVE of anger swept over him. Only one explanation could he think of for the presence of the Mounted Police: they had come to find Frenchy, to rob him of his prey. Worse still, the task had been handed over to the Mounted detachment, for the horse belonged to them. Without a word to him Inspector Barker had gone over his head and had started official pursuit on Frenchy's trail.

As he hurried along he ate ravenously from the parcel he had stolen. The indignation that boiled within him almost submerged the satisfaction of having something to eat at last. But his hunger partly satisfied, curiosity returned, and he started back for the place from which he sought to keep an eye on the two horses. On the opposite slope, safe from observation, he found the spot that suited him, and he lay down to watch. For a long time nothing happened, and his curiosity grew. What a careless thing to let two valuable horses unattended, with two such desperadoes at large! Surely the Mounted Police were losing their cunning.

Only his timely intervention had prevented the carrying through of some dirty plot against the horses. Not that he had planned what he did with that in mind: all he had done was balk a man he did not like, one who had a lot, another to the many scars he carried, and to get something to eat. But Frenchy had forestalled him there, darn him! Scurway was the sort of rogue who was capable of anything.

he would have no mercy on anything belonging to the Mounted Police. Over in Wyoming or Montana where he had spent his life he had done pretty much as he pleased, defying the law. Swift on the draw confident of his prowess with the gun, and always backed by a large following, he had probably acquired a standing that made a sheriff hesitate to enforce the law against him. When one did, fleeing to Canada, it was bound to rankle with him that he was picked up right away by a Mountie.

The Mounted Police horse had offered an opportunity to get even.

But what about Thoreau? Why had he intervened? He could have nothing against Scarway for he had probably never met the fellow before. And he had reason to feel the same toward the Mounted Police.

He did not puzzle long over that. Thoreau was not the sort to satisfy a grudge against the Police by injuring a Police horse. He found no glory in overt means. His satisfaction would come only from getting the better of an enemy when the odds were even. What Scarway had been about to do would find no favour with him.

For some time the half-breed remained where he was. He was curious about the Mounted Policeman. It would be the Constable he had helped, of course, since it was his horse, but he wanted to see him. He was also curious about the Policeman's companion.

After a time he heard someone plunging down through the trees across the valley. Whoever it was made no secret of his movements, and it was apparent that he was not accustomed to existence in the forest. There instructively one moves with caution. It would be, he figured, some companion the Policeman had brought with him to act as guard for his horse. Having

faded in his duty, and having heard the shot, he was on his way at headlong speed to find out what had happened.

Suffron came into view. At sight of him Blue Pete whistled to himself. He had not expected that, though it could not matter to him so far as he could see. Yet somehow he felt that it did matter. He could not help associating Suffron with Sergeant Mahon, though he had seen them together only once several weeks before. That was when he was being taken back to Medicine Hat by the Sergeant on the charge of murdering Grey Coyote.

Suffron reached the two horses, and for a time he noticed nothing wrong, though the glances he cast in every direction betrayed his nervousness. It was only when feeling hungry he sought the package of food that should have been attached to his saddle that he saw what had happened.

For a few moments he appeared to disbelieve his eyes, for he stood with a hand on the saddle, eyeing the empty cantle, then he turned to search about on the ground, as if the parcel might have broken loose. Not finding it and now more upset than ever, he hastily untied the horses and led them away. That he considered the locality dangerous was proven by the fact that he made for the open space in the heart of the valley. That was what a man inexperienced in the woods would do, though it only exposed him more dangerously.

Picking himself up, Blue Pete started down the slope and across the valley where the trees screened him from sight.

As he climbed the opposite slope his mind returned to Scarway. The outlaw had certainly recognized him at the moment when he stepped into view. And the look of venomous fury he sent back as he dived for

cover warned the half-breed what he might expect when again they met.

It meant another foe to face one, too, who, like the Indians, would have no compunctions against shooting him in the back. It was sure to involve him in fresh difficulties, and he felt that already he faced enough of them. Scarway, too, would have all the advantage, for he would concentrate on running him down, while Blue Pete had a more important task on hand and had many foes to circumvent.

His eyes flashed as he thought of it, and unconsciously he increased his pace. A tingle of excitement coursed through him. Danger and more danger—life was worth living.

The feeling quickly subsided. Scarway might be credited with an extra thrill, but he would certainly interfere with the fulfilment of his promise to Inspector Barker. At the best it could mean only embarrassment and delay. It angered him. He recalled their first meeting. There had been a number of blood-drawing shots and a challenge, and only the arrival of the Mounted Policeman had prevented accepting the challenge. The brutality and recklessness depicted on the outlaw's face had aroused in him from the first every atom of instinctive antagonism of which he was capable, and the feeling, he had seen, was mutual.

The thoughts that poured through his mind did not make him careless. Cautiously he advanced, moving from tree to tree, taking advantage of every cover and making no sound. He had almost reached the height when a slight sound behind him and to his left sent him flat against the ground. For a time he heard nothing more. Whoever or whatever it was that had made the sound was no more desirous than he of being seen.

He raised his head. Something dark moved swiftly out of sight not forty yards away. An Indian. He breathed more evenly. Since the Indian was moving away he offered no danger. He had probably heard the shot and come to investigate. Whether he had seen any of the actors in the little drama he could not be certain. Now he was on his way in the other direction.

With the reminder that other life was abroad, Blue Pete remained where he was until he was certain he was alone. Idly he watched in the direction the Indian had taken. Far away he came into view again. And now he was in a hurry.

Only then did he realize that the Indian was Frenchy Thorpe.

Frenchy had vanished. Blue Pete rose and started after him. Perhaps he was trying to trail Scarway to finish their interrupted disagreement. But Frenchy had too big a lead. Blue Pete failed to overtake him.

He kept on angry with himself for not having recognized Frenchy sooner. He was following a zigzag course now toward the east. The forest growth was for the moment thicker, blocking his view. Higher and higher he worked and at last came out on the very top. Still no Frenchy.

"Durn funny," he kept repeating to himself. "Durn funny."

After a time he decided that it was futile to wander about like that. Whiskers would be wondering what had happened to him. She, too, would have heard the shot and be anxious. But for a time more he kept to his course.

Before him the height fell away a little, forming a slight hollow. As he started into it the familiar warning of danger made him hesitate. If he dropped into the hollow he would be at a disadvantage.

Accordingly he started to circle it. But the sense of impending danger grew, and he crouched.

"Rockon ya didn't count on meetin' an old friend here, drawled a voice from behind him. "Put yer hands up, ya damned breed."

No need to look. Blue Pete recognized that voice. It was Scarway. The half-breed's face twisted into a sheepish grin as he turned, at the same time raising his hands.

"I was lookin' fer yuh, yuh darn skunk," he said.

Scarway scowled. "Well yu found me, an' it don't look 's if it's the way yu'd like it. I ban lookin' for yu too. Yu've throwed lead at me too often, an' now I'm goin' to do a bit myself. Yu've butted in."

Blue Pete hands raised, looked into the round black hole of a gun that did not tremble.

"Las time I seed yuh, Scarway, yuh was headed fer a nice long time in quod," he said, in a conversational tone.

"Well, now yu know there ain't no jail can keep me," snarled Scarway. "They started me that way. I beat 'em to it. Broke away."

"Yuh done fer a Mountie down it?"

"Hadn't no chance. Not then. I'll get 'em yet. No damn Mountie's goin' to scare me outa the country."

"Yuh was skeered outa Montany or somewhars, wasn't yuh? Wal, things is a dang sight wuss fer yuh here in Canady."

Scarway's face darkened. "I come over here to see what a fel'uh can do in a place like this."

"An' yuh foun' mighty quick it ain't much yuh kin do. Mighty nasty place fer a skunk. An' yuh ain't seed nothin' yet."

"Don't get nasty, breed, or I'll drill yu where yu stand," threatened Scarway. "Now I want them

guns yu got. That rifle, too. Unslung it an' drop it. I can do with them pistols. Hand 'em over an' be quick about it. But if yu make a move to draw —" He came a step nearer, advancing his gun to within a few feet of Blue Pete's chest.

The half-breed slowly lowered his hands to the sling of his rifle and raised it over his head. He seemed to have accepted the fact that he was beaten. He held the rifle out. Scarway took it in his left hand and dropped it beside him.

"Now them other guns. An' use yer left hand, an' hand 'em over butt first. No foolin'. There ain't nothin' goin' to stop me pressin' this trigger, so be careful."

Blue Pete reached to the gun on his left side and without hesitation gave it up as directed. The .45 remained. It was on his right hip, and he had to reach across his body with his left hand to get it. Carefully he reversed it as it slid from the sheath until he held it by the barrel.

Scarway watched every movement. "Stop there," he ordered. "No yu don't. Yu don't work that on this lad. Turn yer gun over. I'm too old a bird to be caught with the trigger-twirl."

Blue Pete looked hurt at the thought that he ever intended such a treacherous move. The trigger-twirl was a trick attained by a few. It consisted of presenting a gun upside down, butt first, the index finger caught in the trigger-guard. At the last moment, with a flap, the gun was twirled on the finger. The butt fell naturally into the palm, the barrel pointing outward, and the finger was in the exact position to press the trigger.

Blue Pete had developed the trick until he could use it whether the gun was upside down or not, and his left hand was little less dexterous than his right.

Offered right side up, butt first, when it was whirled on the finger it came into position upside down. It made no difference to him.

As Scarway, smiling confidently, reached for the gun it spun about and went off. At the same moment Blue Pete leaped sideways.

Both guns spoke at the same time. Scarway's bullet went harmlessly to one side. Blue Pete's cut through the outlaw's clothes but did not disable him. It did, however, exactly what the half-breed sought. Scarway started to jerk his gun around but he stopped as he saw a black fox staring at him only three feet away. Blue Pete was grinning.

"Sech an ole bird," he jeered. "Reckon you need a lesson or two in twirling a six-shooter. I tol' yuh yuh ain't seed nothin' yet. We got suthin' over here'll make yer eyes pop outa yer head. Yuh ain't sech a bad man as yuh think yuh are, not by a long shot. Sorta twists things up, don't it? Now I'm takin' your guns for a change. On y' yuh're droppin' 'em whar they want to do nobody no harm. An' now it's your turn to hurry. Ther's a darn lot o' folks about these foothills an' they got ears."

Scarway swore viciously, but he dropped the guns he carried.

"Now stan' back."

He moved away. Blue Pete stooped to pick up the guns, one his own only a few seconds before. In the moment the .45 dropped away from him, Scarway leaped. The half-breed had not expected it, of course, and he had been a little careless. He tried to dodge, but Scarway was too quick for him. He landed on the half-breed's shoulders and with both hands he grasped the hand that held the gun.

In the shock Blue Pete went down. Scarway was on top, but the gun was useless to either. Realizing it,

Blue Pete flipped it out of reach. He was willing that it should be a test of strength or endurance. Scarway had all the advantage, for he was on top, but he needs it all and more.

Face down at first Blue Pete tried to roll over but Scarway spread his legs and prevented it. He still held the half-breed's right wrist, but his eyes were on the gun only a couple of feet away. For a few seconds Blue Pete ceased struggling. His face was turned sideways, so that he could follow Scarway's efforts to reach the gun.

Then he worked his left hand close to his side. The elbow came up, the hand flattened out against the ground and slowly he commenced to rise. It was a tremendous exhibition of strength to raise them both with only his left hand. Scarway could not believe it possible, but when he realized what was happening he fought it madly. Steadily they rose. The half-breed was on his knees. Scarway still sprawled over his back. He was trying now to hold the right hand and to knock the left from under his opponent with his knee.

Seeing that it was a losing battle, he suddenly threw himself sideways toward the gun.

But Blue Pete was watching for that. The moment his right hand was free it shot upward, caught about Scarway's body and held it. The half-breed rose to his feet. With a laugh he raised the cowboy over his head, whirled him about, and threw him against a tree. Towering over him as he lay, half-stunned, the half-breed chuckled.

"Fust chancest we had to clear up a little argyment, an' I reckon I won. No, I am' gon' to smash yuh like yuh deserve, or shoot yuh neither. You n' me's got to settle this some other way, I cud do it now too easy, an' yuh wudn' think I was the bes' man mebbe

Yuh 'member yuh creased this ear o' mine, an' we hadn' a chanacet to shoot it out back thar w'en I run yuh down fer the Mountie. Wal, yuh're goin' to hev yer chanacet now. That's wot I was lookin' fer yuh fer."

He picked up the rifle and the three revolvers. Scarway remained on the ground, glaring helplessly up at his opponent. Blue Pete jerked him to his feet.

"I am' skeered o' all the dirty tricks yuh try now w'en yuh am' got no shootin'-ron. I kin handle 'em all." He turned the cowboy about and shoved him before him down the slope.

"Whachu goin' to do with me?" demanded Scarway sullenly.

"We're goin' to do a bit o' fancy shootin', you 'n' me. Yuh think yuh ain't had a chanacet to show wot you kin do in that line. Yuh said yuh wanted to show me the first time we met. Wal, yuh're goin' to show me now. You 'n' me's goin' down to whar it's clear an' see who's got the best eye. We'll settle this thing proper. Besides, yuh're in the road. Gut goin'."

CHAPTER XXXII

AN INTERRUPTED DUEL

SEARWAY hesitated. A scoundrel himself, he could not imagine that another could be trusted. The moment his back was turned, he thought, Blue Pete would shoot.

"Yu dawsent shoot it out fair," he declared.

"Mebbe not, the half-breed declared. "That is, mebbe not the way you'd call fair. Reckon you'd call it fair to shoot now ef yuh was me. Wal, yuh ain't. I told yuh yuh ain't seed nothin' yet. But this is goin' to be a big sight seein' day in yer life, Searway. It's goin' to be a real eddication, too, an' I'm goin' to charge yuh nothin' for it. Yuh otta be tickled pink at wot yuh're larnin', an' so cheap. Ef yuh was me yuh'd shoot now wudn' yuh, jes like yuh planned w'en yuh had me covered. But that ain't no fun to me. I wanta see yer face w'en yuh git yer las' lesson. It a shure goin' to open yer eyes, mebbe a bit late. Course ef yuh're saccered to go on with it.

"To hell with being saccered," snapped Searway. "Gimme a gun an' I'll show ya ya damn breed."

Blue Pete was not even angry. The prospect of completing a thing he had started when he stopped Searway as he fled from the unhorsed Mounted Policeman made him feel better than he had felt all day.

"Shure I got Injun blood. Reckon it's better'n part skunk. We shoot skunks over here. Reckon it don't feel so good the way things got all upset over this side the line, eh? Yuh ain't looked happy sence

I seen yuh fust time Yuh're darn out o' luck, that's wot An' now yuh're darn wot I tell yuh Thar ain't nobody'd be the wiser ef I plugged yuh The Mounties 'd be tickled "

"Gimme that gun - started Scarway

All the time he wondered if he hadn't better make a break for it, trusting to the trees for protection. They grew thickly where they stood, if he could drive behind one of them he might manage to escape. To remain promised to be certain death, for he still doubted the half-breed's sincerity in the suggested duel.

Yuh'll git yer gun w'en we're all nice an' ready ' He seemed to read what was in Scarway's mind, for he continued "But ef yuh try to make a getaway I'll fill yuh full o' lead an' I reckon nobody'd cry 'bout it Yuh're jes a low-down cuss, Scarway. Bes' git goin' fore I git mad an' nasty with yuh I got a mighty nervus finger w'en thar's skunks about "

There was nothing to do but to obey, and Scarway turned and started down the slope. There might yet be a chance to escape. If the half-breed carried through the suggestion of the duel he, Scarway, had sufficient confidence in his prowess with a gun to think his chances better than even. With a gun in his hand again he would feel that everything was all right.

"Hes work a bit to the left," Blue Pete ordered.

Thar was folks down this way not long ago, an' you n me don't want nobody buttin in Besides, yuh wudn wanta butt into a Mountie, now wud yuh? Keep gun an' stretch them legs o' yours. We jes' done some shootin' an' thar's folks mighta heerd I'm in a hurry too, an' yuh're in the way Scarway I don't wanta be bothered with nobody like you w'en I git workin' on 'nother job I got . . . Won't the Mounties be tickled w'en they find yer body? "

Searway plodded steadily on. Behind him at a distance of about three paces came Blue Pete. He had put his gun away. He had no fear that Searway would escape. With or without a gun, running or fighting, the outlaw was no match for him.

For almost a mile they angled down the slope. The point where they would reach the valley Blue Pete figured would bring them to an open space of sufficient size for their purpose and distant enough from where the horses had been to give them time to carry it through without interruption. The shooting would probably be heard but long before anyone could intervene he would be well away. Never for a moment did he think of Searway as the possible winner.

The grade eased. Through the trees Blue Pete caught a glimpse of the open space along the bottom of the valley. He drew Searway's gun from his pocket and examined it. A .38. Most gunmen used .38. It was a lighter gun than a .45 and in hands less powerful than his own it was easier to hold steady. Its range, however, was shorter than the .45. But well either beyond 40 yards a man had to know his gun intimately to be certain of a bullseye. Down the inside of the curve of the butt of the .38 extended a row of gashes. Searway had a long record of killings.

Blue Pete drew his .45 and counted the nicks. Searway's number was greater.

It annoyed the bad breed. It heightened the rivalry between them and something like jealousy rose in his mind.

'Yuh ben done a lot o' shootin' in yer time Searway,' he remarked.

'There's lots among 'em too,' said Searway. 'I like shootin' breeds.' He glanced back, saw the gun being examined and scoffed. 'Pooh! That ain't all. I got nother gun with a lot more. The Mounties

'a' got it. I'll git it back if I have to shoot the hull bunch."

"Reckon thar's room fer nother on this one?" enquired Blue Pete.

"I'll find room for it if I have to scratch the barrel."

Blue Pete laughed. "My gun's bigger—I got lots o' room. But it can seem jes' right to use a .45 again a .38."

"It's all the same at twenty yards," said Scarway.

"No-o. But I got a .38 on'y it's jes' a gun."

"Sure in yu got a rifle, too," scoffed Scarway.

"But I don' waste it on skunks."

"I'd waste a cannon on breeds."

Blue Pete did not reply for a few moments. "I ain't astan' yuh to suicide, Scarway, so can temp me." He looked out into the open valley. "Reckon this ain' too bad out thar. Thar's lots o' room for our lil game, an' we bes git on with it. Ef anybody batted in I know how perved yuh'd be."

At the edge of the trees Scarway pulled up. Blue Pete walked past into the open and glanced up and down. Scarway sneered.

"Look a bit scared yerself," he said.

He was nearer the truth than he thought. Blue Pete had begun to question what he was about to do. He had had time to think about things, and to kill Scarway, as he would be forced to do, offered complications he was not prepared to face. In addition he did not feel that he had chosen the spot well. They had not come far enough from where others had been not long before, and now that the duel was about to take place he felt that there were unseen eyes about them.

Scarway's snarl, however, drowned his fears.

"Shure I'm skeered," he confessed. "I'm skeered somebody'll butt in an git yuh way from me, that's all. An I don' wanta be bothered with yuh 'bout

fer wot I gotta do. Here's yer gun. We're goin' out thar whar thar's no trees. We'll step off twenty steps an' start shootin'. I'll count. Come on."

He handed Scarway his gun, keeping his own ready for instant action if Scarway tried any tricks.

"An 'member," he added as they walked into the clearing, "I gon' trust yuh none."

But he had to do a certain amount of trusting, and it almost ended disastrously.

Scarway appeared to enter into the idea with enthusiasm. It was not all acting either. With a gun in his hand he felt that all was well. The breed must be too simple to be dangerous in a duel. No man with any common sense would handle an enemy a gun when he had him helpless, risking his life on such a foolish contest. As if there was such a thing as honour.

A smile curled his lips.

"I'll call out the steps," Blue Pete told him. "At ten—that's ten for each of us—turn an' start shootin'. Yuh kin come near's yuh hce after that." They turned their backs on each other. "One." Blue Pete stepped out. Scarway did the same. "Two . . . three . . . four . . . five."

Scarway had slowly turned his head.

"Six . . . seven——"

Scarway whirled. Blue Pete must have sensed what was happening for he, too, turned. But before he could raise his gun Scarway fired. The range was short but the half-breed had instinctively dodged, and the bullet went harmlessly over his head.

Before either could shoot again a shot rang out from the trees. With a shriek of terror Scarway leaped across the clearing. In half a dozen strides he reached cover.

Blue Pete, too, had disappeared. Silence settled over the spot. The one who had fired the shot did not come into the open.

But back among the trees he dodged his way upward, laughing as he ran.

"At any rate," he thought, "I didn't save his life this time. It was that other fellow's I saved. Blue Pete would have brought him down for certain in another split second."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SERGEANT ASKS

BLUE PETE knew what had happened. Once more Frenchy had intervened. Frenchy - always Frenchy. Of course with Scarway almost at his mercy it might have been difficult to shoot to kill, and perhaps to that extent Frenchy had done him a service. But he was always turning up to disturb carefully laid plans, injecting into their relationship a complication that should find no place in it, something that involved it more deeply in difficulties.

An antagonism instinctive since he and Scarway had first seen each other had been about to be settled, and Frenchy had bubbled up to prevent it. Now Scarway was safely away and some day it would all have to be gone through again with the outlaw in the meantime free to work havoc with any plans Blue Pete might make to finish off the other and more important job.

The thought of it made him indignant. Thoroughly aroused at last, he turned and ran back into the valley. Foolishly he lashed into the open.

He was brought to his senses by a surprised "hello", and Yuffron stepped from the trees.

Blue Pete pulled up abruptly. More interference. Life was certainly becoming complicated.

'Was that you doing the shooting?' Yuffron enquired. 'There's been a lot of it around to-day. And I can't find . . . Hell! What now?'

For Blue Pete had spun about and dived back into the forest.

Suffron stood staring at the spot where he had disappeared. "I knew all the time," he grumbled, "that this was no place for me."

The conviction impelled him to retire in haste to the spot where he had left the horses. Oppressed there by the shadows among the trees, he returned to the open. He felt better there, less sensitive to the possibility of creeping danger and prying eyes.

He had been there only a few minutes when Sergeant Mahon came panting down the hillside. He saw Suffron and beckoned him back into the forest. The rancher hastened to go to him.

"At one time in my soft career," he puffed, wiping his forehead, "I had a hankering for joining the Mounted Police. When I do you can certificate me without professional support for an insane asylum. In fact, I'm crazy to have come along merely as a caddy for one. There isn't a thing about it in my line."

Sergeant Mahon's face was grave. "What has happened? Who has been doing all the shooting?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know if I'm here or in a hospital with ice on my head. I've heard the shooting, slathers of it, but I seem always to be where it isn't, and I get there in time to discover nothing. I don't mind being missed by a bullet now and then, but I like to know something about where they come from and where they went. It's uncanny. I don't feel a bit comfortable. I never thought——"

"Do you mean you've seen no one?" the Sergeant broke in.

"Not quite that bad . . . or is it worse? What I saw only makes the whole affair more mysterious." He noticed the Sergeant's growing impatience, and he hurried on. "It was that ubiquitous breed. The moment I——"

"You mean Blue Pete?" The Sergeant took an eager step toward him.

"Call him what you like, I'd call him a nightmare. He's the only breed who's figured in my life. Not three minutes ago he stood there in the open, looking as if he had a grudge against the world and was out to settle the account. He certainly can look murderous. He laughed. The one bright point about it is that I didn't appear to be included in the settlement. The moment I saw him he tailed away. It was all in keeping. After this, if you don't mind, I'm going with you wherever you go, till we get somewhere where I can dark for home. Let's see, haven't there been about half a dozen shots all told? And they covered a lot of territory—up the valley at first, then off up there at the top of the hill, then down here. Sort of weird, the way they float about one's ears. And yet I believe that breed was mixed up in them all. He must have seven-league boots. He's probably down in Montana by this time."

Sergeant Mahon had heard only the essentials. "Are you sure he figured in any of the shots?"

"When I saw him just now he had his gun in his hand. It wasn't actually smoking, but it looked hot. He came charging down through the trees there, just hungry for trouble."

"It was probably curiosity—he'd heard the shots, just as we did."

But Saffron had formed an opinion. "Not with that face."

"Are the horses safe?"

"Don't ask me. Nothing's safe. They're just back there a bit—last I saw of them. I'd go and see—with you."

Mahon demanded more detailed information.

I'd left the horses for a few minutes the first

ture," Suffron told him, "following the way you went up the hill. It was some time after you'd gone. I was lonesome, and there didn't seem to be any necessity to stick close to the horses. It was while I was away that the first shot came. It was down near the horses somewhere. But when I got back to them everything was quiet and ordinary. No, not quite that. Somebody had stolen my grub parcel. I'll have to live on you for a few meals. Or do I starve as punishment?"

"Only your lunch gone?"

"There was nothing else to take, was there?"

"Our horses and our saddles," said the Sergeant dryly, "and that would have left us in a fix. Now go back and watch those horses. But first, where was that last shooting?"

"Just down there at the angle in the clearing. May I bring the horses along?"

"A.L. right."

Mahon hurried to the point indicated. Suffron hurried as swiftly to the horses. Mahon was too intent on picking up a trail to notice what he did. A few drops of blood on the grass and leaves caught his attention right away. They continued into the trees on the other side of the valley, and there he lost them. He returned to where Suffron stood watching him.

"You're sure it wasn't the half-breed who was wounded?"

"If he was wounded he was the ablest bodied casualty I ever saw. It didn't handicap him, coming or going. One minute I was here alone, the next he was there, and in just about the same instant I was alone again. He's an uncanny creature."

Mahon's brow was lined with anxiety. But, troubled as he was, he had no thought of discussing his troubles with his companion. Suddenly he turned to his horse.

"We're going to visit that Indian camp. It's just

over the hill in the next valley. I saw it from the other side of the hill. We'll ride back for a couple of miles to where the grade is less steep and the trees thinner, and cut across. I want to approach the camp openly.'

Suffron sighed and mounted his horse. "As long as you ride east I'll feel like a million dollars. After that—well, I may take to prayer. I never did like the Indians. I'm not fond of the foothills. I shudder when I think of the combination, with a ghostly breed thrown in. This fellow you call Blue Pete isn't in my line."

The Sergeant slackened his pace to let Suffron overtake him. Gravely he looked him over. "You need have no fear from the breed. In fact I know of no one in the foothills who carries a curse about you . . . except—" he asked hesitantly, "that you're travelling with me. Perhaps I shouldn't have brought you. It isn't fair. If you want to call your part of it off I won't object."

Suffron winked cunningly. "You're not going to get rid of me now, no, sirree—just when things are getting interesting. I'm damned curious. All this has got me guessing, and I won't sleep till I know I'd rather die of a bullet than of insomnia. But why should there be danger for you, Sergeant?"

"It's our daily lot, I suppose. All this is part of our work. The Indians don't like us, as you know. They're likely to like me less before I'm through. But about the half-breed. Far from being a danger to you, if you get into trouble and can find him, throw yourself on his car. Nobody could look after you more capably. You can trust him."

Suffron was not so sure. "You seem to know him. I don't. I feel I never will. I'm not sure I want to. My whole experience with him has been—well, exciting, to say the least. But there's more than the breed

around. He didn't do all the shooting—or if he did, what or whom was he shooting at? There were shots all around me."

Mahon was in something of a dilemma. He did not wish to talk about Blue Pete, yet there might arise a situation where the half-breed's assistance would be necessary, and, for Suffron his protection. For the rancher might innocently find himself in danger. There was Thoreau, for instance. Thoreau would have no pity on the Mounted Police or their friends. And Thoreau was somewhere about or Blue Pete would not be there.

"If you wish to get out of this," he repeated "it's for you to decide. I can use you at the camp, that's all."

"And you're going to, if I have anything to say about it. If you're not fluent in their lingo you'll get damned little out of them. They'd contend they don't understand, and they know no English. Sure I'm going along."

As the forest on their left cleared a little, Sergeant Mahon led up the slope on the way to the next valley. They had almost reached the height when he pulled up sharply. They were above the thicker growth of trees, and he had chanced to glance behind him. Suffron saw him start, and he turned quickly. He was in time to see someone move swiftly out of sight on the opposite slope.

"Did you see him?" asked the Sergeant. "Who in the world can he be? It was no Indian."

"Looked to me like some stray cowboy," suggested Suffron. "I wouldn't recognize him at this distance. One would think he didn't wish to be seen."

Mahon granted. "No need merely to thank . . . Now what in the world is he doing here?" He remained where he was for several seconds, thinking deeply. "No," shaking his head and starting on, "it would

be foolish to take after him now, he'd be far away by the time we got there, and he wasn't standing still. We'll finish what we're at first. But that cowboy is worth looking into later, I'll remember him."

They dropped into the next valley. The Sergeant was silent and thoughtful. In the broad open heart of the valley he turned westward toward the Indian camp. The trail was well worn, and they rode slowly along. Suffron in the rear, leaving Mahon to his reflections.

Suddenly the Sergeant issued a warning, but he did not turn or slow down.

"Don't look suddenly," he called back, "but up the slope to our left an Indian is watching us from the trees. There's a fallen log there tilted slightly to the west. He's trying to conceal himself behind a tree near its base. Take a look and tell me what you make of him."

Suffron lazily turned his head as if to do something to the rope on that side of the saddle horn, but under his brows he directed his eyes where the Sergeant had indicated. The latter talked on, appearing not to look.

"There's nothing surprising, of course, in seeing an Indian. Indeed, I'm surprised we've met none before this. But that chap's surprisingly well fed, they don't grow them often as round as he is. One thing, we don't need to fear now that we'll surprise them at the camp, that chap'll warn them. I'd as soon have it that way. If we came on them too suddenly we'll frighten them, they'd be suspicious and unhelpful. A frightened Indian is speechless. . . . There, he seems to have gone."

A quarter of an hour later they came within sight of the encampment. At the moment it appeared almost deserted. A few squaws were in sight, and

two braves were squatted in the centre of the path smoking. Dogs roamed restlessly about.

To Sergeant Mahon's surprise they attracted no attention whatever for a time. It was the dogs caught sight of them first, and promptly they went up a howl. The two braves turned quickly, saw them and disappeared. In a lately afterwards the squaws did the same.

The Sergeant frowned. "Either that's a clever bit of acting," he mused, "or they weren't expecting us. That's strange."

They went down the curving path between the tepees. As they came within sight of the place where the chief's tepee had stood they understood why they had seen so little life elsewhere. The tepee was still under reconstruction. To one side, concealed from the newcomers at first by the intervening tepees, most of the camp life was gathered. The chief, hastily picking up a blanket to wrap about himself, came toward them. There was a certain grim reticement in the gesture that did not fail to impress the Sergeant.

In his broken Blackfoot he addressed the chief. There was no reply. Several of the braves had disappeared. Mahon turned to Suffron.

"This is where you come in. Ask him what happened to his tepee. Do it in a casual way, we mustn't frighten him. But I've an idea strange things have been occurring here recently." He made a wry face. "I hope no one understands English."

Suffron passed the question on. For several seconds the chief only stared in cold silence. Suffron repeated the query.

"A pony ran into it in the night," the chief replied.

The Sergeant understood without the interpretation. "Huh! What a liar he is! The pony must have been drinking their fire-water. It isn't such a bad story

on such short notice, but it doesn't fit the bill. Did you notice as we came along some holes in the walls of the tepees? They were bullet holes. I made them out easily enough in the skins, they were hard to see in the canvas. However, we can't call him a liar. Ask him if he's seen anything of a half breed about here lately."

When the question was put, a casual observer might have failed to notice anything in the chief's expression to belie the reply he made. No, there had been no half breed. But Mahon was watching closely, he had dealt with Indians too long to miss anything.

Perhaps the chief doubted that he had covered his inquietude at the unexpected question, "for he turned away."

"I'll ask my people," he said.

"He'll ask them," murmured Mahon, "to give himself time to collect his wits."

The chief remained for several seconds muttering indistinctly to the braves behind him, then he turned.

"They say a half breed was there in the forest yesterday and the day before. And the day before that," he added, after a pause.

"Because he has seen Blue Pete himself," said Mahon.

The chief had had time to prepare a wiser reply, and now he made a great showing of a confession.

"He was here last night. He shot many times into the tepees, you may see the bullet holes. We do not know why he came or what he wanted, for we have done nothing. We are afraid of him, that is why I had no wish to speak of him. We hope the Mounted Police will catch him and take him away."

"Ask him," said Mahon, after an uncomfortable pause, "if the bullets killed anyone."

"No. We were lucky."

The Sergeant smiled. "You were lucky he didn't wish to kill you. If he knew Blue Pete as I do he'd know they escaped only because the half breed didn't wish to kill. But that gets us nowhere. Why did he shoot up the camp? He doesn't go in for shooting without good reason, no, not even to miss. . . . Ask him if that was one of his men we saw back on the slope."

Suffron put the question and interpreted the reply "He says he does not know."

Suffron described the Indian they had seen. He's fat and short with a round face. He wore a bright red kerchief about his neck.

Even the rancher noticed the effect of the description. But it showed more on his followers than on the chief, who made a long reply.

Suffron interpreted. "He says it can't be one of his men. He says there's been a strange Indian roving about for weeks. They think he is up to no good—perhaps rustling—and that he hides in the foothills. The fellow has tried to get the Indians to help him. The chief wonders the Mounted Police have not got after him long ago. He also says the breed was here once before, a few weeks ago, and that then he was stained and dressed like an Indian."

"Ah!" muttered the Sergeant. "So he knows of that, does he? And now he's seen through the disguise. . . . Ask him if he knows anything else about this other Indian, and how long he's been here—exactly."

The reply came without delay. "He came first about a moon ago. We do not know whence he came, but he said the Mounted Police wanted him. That was why we would have nothing to do with him. We hope the Mounted Police will get him too, as well as the half breed."

"If he knew all this, why didn't he tell us?" demanded the Sergeant angrily.

The question was not answered. It frightened the chief and he would say nothing. The Sergeant recognized that he had made a mistake, and that it would be useless to continue the questions for the time being.

"Tell him I'm visiting several of the camps, and that if he or his men see the half-breed or this other Indian to report immediately to us. I'm going south now. He can find me in that direction for several days. But I don't need to tell him that, every camp in the foothills will know where I am. We'll go now."

CHAPTER XXXIV

A SAFETY MEASURE

AS they rode away down the valley, retracing the route they had come Sergeant Mahon had nothing to say for a long time. There were so many things that had happened within a few hours that gave him deep thought. Every instinct impelled him to connect them all with Blue Pete. The shooting? It was difficult to dissociate him from any use of firearms in his vicinity. Yet if he was involved why was there nothing to show for it but a few trailing drops of blood?

Why and at whom had he shot, and why had he missed except that once when a few drops of blood showed that the bullet had struck home? At Thoreau? The Sergeant did not think so. The half-breed was there to get Thoreau; if he shot at him it would be to disable him at least. The dread that he might shoot with more tragic results sent a shudder through the Sergeant. In the latter case there was trouble in store for everyone concerned.

If Thoreau had escaped it meant a more vengeful outlaw, and that too meant trouble. For in there in the forest Thoreau would have all the advantage. . . Should he and Blue Pete meet it would necessarily be a duel to the death.

For the thousandth time Sergeant Mahon cursed the judge who had, by his thoughtless refusal to accept the half-breed's evidence in court, deprived the Mounted Police of the official services of their most useful assistant. Official, Blue Pete might have

killed in self-defence. Now, unrecognized by anyone but Inspector Barker, should he kill Thorrain it would be brought out that he had gone to the foothills to capture him. It would not give him the right to protect himself by using his gun.

One bright spot alone shone through the disturbing incidents of the day as yet Blue Pete himself was safe.

Studying the incidents from every angle as he rode along things commenced to look a little brighter. Plainly enough Blue Pete had not as yet killed or even captured Thorrain or he would have reported. The fleeting glimpse Suffron had caught of him proved that his task was still incomplete. At the same time his desire not to be seen introduced a disquieting feature. Was it merely his wish to act alone? Or was it that he and Suffron had parted on none too friendly terms when the rustled cows had been returned?

One thing was certain everything pointed, to more danger to himself. That in itself was not alarming to the Sergeant, but it tangled in the same danger the innocent rancher he had brought with him.

Suffron broke in on his reflections.

"You don't believe anything the chief said, do you?"

"On general principles I believe nothing any Indian says. But there were grains of truth though they were presented in a way to suit the chief's purpose—his plans or his fears. He wants Blue Pete out of the way—that's certain."

"And the other Indian?"

"Yes. That's something that puzzles me. The chief distinctly hates that fellow. Some time I must find out why. That wrecked tepee has a story and I wish I knew it. Of course, it was no stumbling or blind pony. You may have noticed signs that the

affair had been brought down from the inside. The sticking of the skins had been burst from within, not from outside. It means that the wrecking was done by someone bursting his way out from inside. That's the story, without the detail I need. But I'm going to hang around till I get it complete.

"What about the half-breed shooting up the camp?" asked Suffron.

"I don't know." The Sergeant shook his head irritably. "They have something against Blue Pete, and it isn't that he ran amok and shot the place up last night. It dates from something long before that. In the first place Blue Pete doesn't shoot without reason. I'm wondering if it could be he who charged into the tepee wall to get away, if they had him prisoner or something. He's been held prisoner many times before this and he always succeeded in getting free. They've got it in for him, and they'll have fewer compunctions about shooting him at sight than they will about shooting me."

"Which brings me to what I said before, you'd better cut loose and make for home. This has gone too far for an outsider to get mixed up with. I can make out alone."

"Not if you hope to have any real confabs with the Indians," Suffron opposed. "You need an interpreter."

But the Sergeant would not consider it. "I can get on alone. In some ways I'm better off without you. I can look after myself when I might not be able to protect us both."

"But if I'm willing to take the chance?"

"I can't permit it. This is no job of yours. I've got to walk more warily hereafter than I expected. You'd better start right away. You've a hard four or five hour ride before you're out of the woods."

"What are you going to do?" Suffron asked gloomily.

' What I came for . . . I should have recognized that this is no place for anyone but a Mounted Policeman. And as you crawl into a nice soft, warm bed you might spare me a thought as I try to keep warm in the open, with only one blanket, and with my saddle as my only pillow. I'm going to strike south over the hills now. I think I can get the horse through here. You'll know where you are when you reach the prairie "'

CHAPTER XXXV

WAYLaid

UNTIL Sergeant Malon had pushed his horse deep into the forest on the hillside, and the sound of his progress had faded away Suffron remained looking hungrily along the way he had gone. He was both indignant and ashamed.

"He sets trouble ahead," he said to himself, "and he thinks I can't face it. Yet all the time I'm consumed with such curiosity that I've half a mind to sneak along after him. It's mystery I dread most, damn him. He sighed and chirruped to his horse. "But I guess we must do as we're told, Billy, when the Mounties do the telling. And we might as well make time doing it. I know lots of sensations more pleasant than being caught alone in the dark in these parts."

With a final reproachful look up through the trees, he urged his mount forward. It would be dark, no matter how fast he rode, before he reached the open prairie.

His horse appeared to feel something of its rider's nervousness, for it set a fast pace eastward, its ears jerking from side to side, peering into the gloom of the trees on both sides of the valley as it cantered along.

But there was no chance of escaping the foothills before night. The sun had already dropped behind the mountains when the Sergeant set off alone, and twilight was short. With the deepening of the shadows Suffron's fancies roamed more wildly. Everyone he

had seen since reaching the foothills except the Sergeant became a menace. The Indians he had always feared. Blue Pete? He had never liked breeds, and a breed that was also a mystery was particularly upsetting. The Sergeant had tried to appear unperturbed, but he had certainly feared the worst when he crossed the companion he had brought for a purpose.

While his mind ran over the significant incidents of the day, night dropped over him. He was still flanked on both sides by deep, black forest-clad heights. He had little idea how much farther he must ride before reaching the open prairie.

Before him the valley narrowed. The hillsides, packed with blackness, crowded in until only a narrow gap remained. The stream that followed the course of the valley, gurgled along at one side. Saffron, as he approached the gap, felt uneasy. Once through that narrow opening and he would feel safe. Yet he had a definite feeling that he would not get through without something happening.

He was not greatly surprised therefore though it made the experience no more pleasant—when, as he reached it, a man rode out from the trees and blocked his way.

He could make out no features, but sufficient light remained to enable him to see that it was an Indian. A few yards away he drew in, his heart pounding.

'Well,' he said, trying to make his tone friendly and casual, 'are you lost or am I?' He spoke in blackishet, and it made him no more comfortable that the Indian did not reply for several seconds.

'Where are you going?' asked the Indian.

Something in the tone made Saffron's ears prick up. The Indian dialect had been perfect, but there was something odd about it.

"I'm making for home—if I ever get there I couldn't make it before dark. My name's Suffron, I'm from the Circle R."

"What are you doing in here?"

The peremptory note, the form of the question, drowned every feeling of dread Suffron had had. He bristled.

"I can't see that it's any concern of yours. This is open country."

"I'm making it my concern," said the Indian.

"Then you can go plump to hell," replied Suffron in English.

"Look out that you don't precede me," said the Indian in Blackfeet.

Suffron made a whistling sound of surprise. "So you understand English. In that case we'd better use it. I can tell you more easily what I think of your meddling."

"I understand English," answered the Indian, still in Blackfeet, "but I don't talk it well. You may use it if you wish."

"I'm not inclined to use much of anything. I'm on my way home, and it's late. So if you'll get out of my way I'll start along."

The Indian did not move. "No hurry. You were with a Mounted Policeman. What is he doing here?"

"You'd better ask him."

"I'm asking you."

"And I'm telling you to go to hell," replied Suffron angrily. "And if you don't get out of my way the Mounted Police will have some questions to ask you."

The Indian laughed.

Suffron's anger mounted. "You seem sure of yourself."

"Don't you think I've reason to be, seeing that I have you covered? And I shoot rather straight."

"Oho! So it's you who did all the shooting to-day I was curious about that."

"And the Mounted Policeman?"

"Naturally."

"Did either of you see me?"

"If you're the one who watched us from the hillside as we rode to the camp, we did see you. You didn't wish to be seen—that was evident."

"I'm not interested in that," said the Indian impatiently. "I want to know what Sergeant Ma — what the Mounted Police are doing here."

Suffron had not missed the correction. "Why ask me? I'm not in his confidence. I came along merely as interpreter. The Sergeant speaks little Blackfeet."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He left me hours ago. Are you going to let me pass?"

"What you tell me what he's doing in here."

"But I tell you I don't know. All I know is that he was asking about a half breed."

"Ah!" There was satisfaction in the exclamation.

"Did the Sergeant inquire about anyone else?"

"About whom else?"

"You were at the Indian camp. I've been waiting for you."

There was such a distinct threat in the tone in which it was said that Suffron considered dashing in among the trees, to run the risk of a shot in the dark.

"You expected the Sergeant to be with me now, didn't you?" he said.

"If he had been," grated the Indian, "you'd have gone on alone, as you are now."

Suffron laughed. "That's what you think. But the

Mounties have a habit of coming through these little affairs unscathed."

"Not with me. I'm shooting straight at every Mountie I see. With the whole lot of them after me, that's what I have to do. And now you'd better make time out of this."

With a slash of his quirt he sent his horse in among the trees, crashing up the slope.

Suffron rode on. He felt no fear now, too much of intimate concern had happened for that. The incident called for immediate action, but he could not for the moment decide what it should be. Presently he himself turned into the forest and climbed the slope to the south.

He rode recklessly, leaving the horse to pick its way through the darkness. He had come to a definite decision, and he was set on carrying it through without delay. To his surprise he felt wonderfully stimulated. He had never been in pressing personal danger before, and he began to think he had missed a lot by not having joined the Mounted Police after all.

In the Indian he recognized a real danger, though in only a small part a danger to himself. But Sergeant Mahon must be warned about what he had to face. The note in the Indian's voice far more even than his words had proven how he hated the Mounted Police. He would shoot the Sergeant at sight, and there in the foothills he would have a thousand opportunities to be in wait for a shot.

A gentle breeze rustled the tree-tops, but a new keenness had come to his ears as he listened for every sound in the darkness about him. The blood tugged pleasantly in his veins.

That was why, as he reached the bottom of the slope in the next valley, he felt certain that he was no longer alone. He could not be sure that he had heard

any sound to warrant the feeling, but as distinctly as if someone had spoken he knew that a man stood nearby as he emerged into the open.

He thought of the Indian. But that could not be. The Indian would not delay in making his presence known, would probably have done so with a shot. Who else it could be he could not even guess, except that it was probably some other Indian wondering what he was doing there.

As he came out into the brighter opening beyond the trees a voice challenged him from behind.

"Want a bit, stranger?" It was a lazy but distinctly threatening voice. "Seems to me there's too damn much snow-pun' in these parts. Where yu makin' for an' whatchu doin'?"

It was the question the Indian had asked, but it was certainly not the Indian's voice. Everyone in the foothills appeared to be curious about everyone else, a sign of a guilty conscience. But, come to think of it, he himself was curious. He laughed. He was not afraid.

"You can bet your Sunday shirt I'm not here for the pleasure it gives me. But who are you, and what are you doing here?"

The man stepped into the open. Suffron could make out size and shape but little more.

"Reckon I'm astin' the questions, stranger. An' I want the answers. I've got a mighty good six shooter here that backs me up, too. I'm waitin'."

"You've got no right." Suffron commenced angrily. He blustered, for he knew now that he was in more danger than he had been with the Indian.

"We're not discussin' rights, only whatchu gotta do," the man broke in. "In the country where I come from a gun's the only right a felluh has. I happen to have the gun, an' I can see if yu draw."

"I see no necessity to draw," said Sufton. "Nor not here planning trouble for anyone. There's no reason why you shouldn't know what I'm doing. I'm after strays. I'm from the Circle R—a ranch you've probably heard of, if you're from any parts near. I couldn't get back to-night, so I'm making for the next valley to take a look there."

"Wh' plan'nin' to ride all night then?" asked the other suspiciously.

"Not if I can find a place to sleep. But I've slept out before, it won't hurt me."

The man gave a contemptuous laugh. "Was yu lookin' fer strays when yu was with the Mountie to-day?"

"Certainly. We've missed quite a few cattle recently. I've suspected the Indians. I brought a Mountie to see what we could find."

"Where's the Mountie now?"

"I've no idea. We parted long ago. We'd been to a camp. The Mountie hadn't time for more."

"Did yu find yer strays?"

"Not yet. That's why I stayed to have a look around to-morrow. I'm not certain where I am. Are you a stranger in these parts?"

The man swore coarsely. "The Mounties try to make me think I am, damn 'em. They been tryin' it ever since I come across the line."

"So you're from the other side, eh? Well, the Mounties are awfully curious. I know. But if they have nothing against you—"

"They sure have," growled the stranger. "An' they'll have a damn sight more before I'm through with 'em. I'll give 'em something to remember me by. Reckon I ain't got nothin' again' you, so skip along. But yu needn't say nothin' to nobody that yu seen me."

He faded back into the trees. Suffron gathered up the reins. "Good night," he called into the darkness. Then he rode across the clearing and dived into the darkness of the opposite slope.

More than ever he was anxious to have a talk with Sergeant Mahon.

CHAPTER XXXVI

ANOTHER AMBUSH

HE had not far to go to find him. In the middle of the following afternoon he came on him. Mahon, he knew, would make for the next Indian encampment to repeat his inquiries. Where that camp was Suffron did not know, but that he would find it in one of the succession of valleys was certain, as well as that its location would be revealed by a well worn trail. The search offered, no allure, for he had always avoided the foot! He hated the Indians as he did, but there was nothing else for it but to keep on until he had delivered the warning.

During the morning he became aware that an Indian encampment was somewhere near. Through the forest where he laboriously picked his way came the distant barking of dogs. Whereupon he rode directly downward, knowing that at the bottom he would find the usual grassy open. The excitement of the dogs, too, told him that something unusual was occurring.

He came on the clearing and, dismounting, continued on foot, deciding that the Sergeant would not welcome his appearance if he was in conference with the Indians. With that idea he worked back into the trees to a point where he could look down on the camp.

About the largest tepee the entire population of the camp seemed to be congregated, and in the midst of the crowd Suffron made out the peaked Stetson of the Sergeant. Creeping as near as he dare, he took cover

at the very edge of the forest to watch proceedings and to be ready to waylay the Sergeant when the interview was over.

He was too far distant to hear what was said, but from the gestures and manner of the Indians and of Mallon he was able to follow to some extent the course of the talk. That the Indians were having trouble with the Sergeant's mastery of their language was evident for they kept looking at one another questioningly.

But the time came when, still exchanging glances, their manner altered. Evidently they knew what the Sergeant was saying but they did not wish to understand. On every face was that expressionless vacancy so well mastered by the Indian when he has something to conceal.

The Sergeant grew more animated. He gesticulated, pushed back his Stetson, appealed to face after face. Not an atom of encouragement did he receive, and at last he gave it up. Obviously annoyed he turned away. He had learned nothing. The crowd followed him to his horse. As he mounted he turned for a last word with the chief, but the same cold silence faced him and, flushed with anger, he rode away toward the open valley.

Suffron had not waited for the end. Hurrying back to his own horse, he mounted and, skirting along through the trees until he was out of sight of the camp, he rode into the open. The Sergeant heard him before he showed himself and his hand flew instinctively to his rifle. Suffron cantered up to him.

"I've been looking for you all night and all morning, Sergeant," he panted.

The Sergeant read in his manner that something important had happened. "What is it now? Why didn't you go home?"

"I've been meeting people, strange people. First it was an Indian."

"An Indian? What about it?"

"It was the Indian we saw trying to hide himself on the hillside as we rode to the other camp."

Sergeant Mahon's manner became more alert. "You mean you talked to him?"

Suffron felt more important, he had been wondering if he were not making a mountain of a mole-hill.

He did most of the talking. . . managed to swear at him. He waylaid me in the narrowest part of the valley, rode out before me in the darkness and literally held me up, forced me to stop and talk."

"Yes, yes!" impatiently. "Go on. What did he have to say?"

"He wanted to know who I was and what I was doing in the foothills. He was even more curious about you."

Sergeant Mahon smiled. "I'll bet he was."

"Evidently he doesn't like the Mounted Police."

"The foothills are full of his kind. What did you tell him?"

"I told him to go to hell."

Mahon laughed. Then he whistled. "And you're here to tell of it. I'm surprised. It isn't safe to be defiant in here, you know, it's so easy to put an enemy out of the way without being discovered."

"I'm rather surprised myself, come to think of it," Suffron confessed. "I said you were searching for a half-breed. I didn't think that would interest him or get you into trouble—more trouble, I mean."

Mahon frowned. "What trouble do you mean?"

"He was there to waylay you, he admitted it, said if you'd been with me I'd have gone on alone."

A slow smile crept into the Sergeant's face. "Thanks. But it's no surprise to me, not even news. I'd expect it of that Indian any time we met."

"Then you know who he is—you've met before?"

The smile lingered. "Was there anything about him that made you doubt that he was an Indian?"

"Why—why, yes, now I come to think of it. He spoke Blackfoot perfectly, but with a twang that attracted my attention from the first, and he certainly understood English. Damn it, that's what's been bothering me all the time. He was no Indian."

"No. And he speaks English better than you or I do, Suffron. Yes, I know who he is, and the Mounted Police have been after him for weeks. I can tell you now that he's the cause of my visit to the foothills. Indirectly. First of all I must find the half-breed."

Unless, of course, Thoreau—he's the Indian—crosses my path."

They rode for some time, discussing the meeting. Suddenly Suffron remembered.

"Oh, I almost forgot, there was another. While I was on my way to warn you another stranger stopped me. I seem to have been riding straight into trouble all night. This second chap was certainly white, but in colour only. I didn't like the sound of his voice and he, too, had a gun. I've faced more guns in this one night than in all my life before. I understand now why you joined —"

"What about this other man?" the Sergeant interrupted.

"He, too, wished to know all about you and me, too—only he was even more threatening about it. I knew I had to be careful with him. I wished him to hell but I knew better than to mention it."

The Sergeant asked what the man was like

"I could make out little in the dark, of course, but he talked like any daredevil cowboy. Say, what about that cowboy we caught a glimpse of yesterday?"

The Sergeant nodded. "Yes, I was thinking of him. Go on with your story. What happened?"

"Nothing much. He asked about you. Told me the Mounties are after him, that he has something in store for them. That makes two you must guard against, Sergeant. That's why I came to warn you."

"Thanks. He had no more to say?"

"No. I said I was after strays, that was all. You know I believe I'd make a dandy Mountie. I lie so easily. Every time I talk to one of you I realize what an art it is."

Mahon was not listening. "Couldn't you see enough to give some description of him? Was he tall or short, fat or thin?"

"He was tall and thin. I'm quite sure he must be the cowboy we saw."

The wind caught a heap of leaves beside the trail and whirled them upward as if they were alive. The Sergeant's horse reared suddenly and swung to one side.

It was that saved him. From the trees high up the hillside came the sharp note of a rifle shot, and a bullet whined through between the Sergeant's body and the horse's head.

Automatically his hand flew back and jerked the rifle from the saddle sheath. In the same movement he hurled himself to the ground on the other side.

"Get off and quick!" he ordered. "Make for the trees on this side, for your very life."

With his rifle butt he struck the horse and sent it racing along the valley, while he leaped to the cover of the trees.

A second shot sounded. But it came from another spot, and no bullet was audible.

Safe among the trees, the Sergeant chuckled. "They've started to waylay me already, Suffron. Your warning was timely. But even at that I owe my life to a gust of wind."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE LAST TRAIL

FOR a moment or two after he and Scarway had dodged to safety among the trees Blue Pete continued following the cowboy to complete what had been so unexpectedly interrupted. But he found himself more interested in the interruption. He had no doubt about what had happened. Frenchy had seen them and intervened, as usual. He would not give Scarway a chance to win the duel, since he wanted Blue Pete for himself.

But, thinking it over, that failed to explain everything. Scarway had already fired and missed. Thereafter he was at Blue Pete's mercy. The one who had been saved was Scarway. And by saving Scarway Thoreau had saved him, Blue Pete. Had he shot the outlaw he would have had to explain to the Inspector or to conceal the affair. And concealment did not appeal to him, for it savoured of guilt. He would have been conscious of no sense of guilt.

He rallied his anger at Thoreau. "Nother count agin yuh, Frenchy. Yuh're buttin' in too darn much. Some day yuh'll git me mad an' I won't wait for yuh to start slingin' lead."

With that thought he had rushed back to the valley, only to be turned off by Saffron appearing on the scene.

Fleeing from the rancher, he had made directly for the pinto. He found her where he had left her. She had heard the shooting but, since it had come from

several directions she had not risked starting away to investigate.

Riding through little trees he tried to work out some plan of campaign that might hasten the completion of his task. As the hours passed he was conscious of a growing discomfort and impatience. He felt himself out of place, not alone because of the difference in his surroundings, but because conditions were crowding him to some sort of tragic mistake.

Suddenly he wanted to be free to hasten back to the 3 Bar where, at least, his mistakes had been too frequent to disturb him unduly. Usually he managed to wriggle out of them with the help of Inspector Barker. He tried to figure out once more how long he had been absent from Mira, but so much had happened that he was uncertain of dates. Of course Mira would be in a fret, and that was what mattered, not only because it would make her unhappy, but because she was apt to take extreme measures to relieve her distress.

It angered him that fresh complications were always cropping up. Scarway was something more than a threat; he was a distraction. And until their feud was settled he would never feel at rest. Thoreau's intervention just when it was about to be settled made it more hauntingly imperative that it should be settled. Even Scarway's defiance, his self-confidence, his desire equal to his own to fight out their mutual hatred to a finish, called for recognition that almost rivalled his interest in Frenchy Thoreau.

He debated for a time which was the more pressing issue. Thoreau's elimination was nothing more than a duty and a mauling of gun handling. Scarway was a personal issue, an instinctive hatred that must be wiped from his life, and a pressing debt to pay. No one had ever wounded him before and got away

scatheless. Moreover Scarway's one thought was to keep out of the way of the police of two countries, and that might take him anywhere beyond reach.

Scarway's appearance on the scene explained the presence of the Mounted Police, and in that thought the half-breed felt his spirits rise. Seeing only the Mounted Police horse that he recognized as belonging to the Macleod detachment, he never for a moment suspected that it had brought his friend, Sergeant Mahon.

What did trouble him however was that the Policeman was probably in more danger than he suspected. Neither Scarway nor Thorau would hesitate to shoot without warning. Scarway was that sort of rogue, and Thorau would fight to the last ditch to prevent capture. The mere sight of the uniform might well start him shooting for he would be certain to consider himself the object of the official presence in the foothills.

Weighing one against the other he decided that Scarway was his most immediate concern. Frenchy would wait, Scarway would surely take flight if pressed by the Mounted Police.

And that made Whiskers a handicap. For the time being there would be no great distances to travel, nor would he require her to carry him to safety from any pressing danger. It was, indeed, impossible for a horse to move at any speed in the forest. What was most necessary was secrecy, the ability to move about silently and that was impossible with a horse to care for.

He decided to find some safe hiding place where he might leave the pinto, perhaps for days. There must be feed and water, as well as ample protection from storm and discovery. The problem it presented occupied his mind for a time. Then he recalled that, as he skirted up along the heights on the day he had come

on the Indians preparing to hang Thoreau, he had found a tight little clearing far back of the camp. He had noticed it then because it was so beautiful, so complete—grass growing luxuriantly in it, and a clear stream rippled along one side. The approach too was discouraging for a spot with no reason for visiting the spot, for it was strewn with large rocks.

He pulled up and crouched, his eyes trying to locate it in his mind. It must be several miles away—to the west—at a higher elevation. He started toward it.

"Yuh're not goin' to like it, ob gal," he muttered to the pinto, "but if yuh got any sense yuh'd see wot a dandy spot it is to be in. It aint like yuh a be."

Shortly after noon he found it. A distant mountain peak gushed him, though he had not been conscious of noticing it on his earlier visit. Saddle and bridle he removed and concealed amid the branches of a spruce tree. Whiskers follow. I am about like a dog watching every move, unobtrusive and plainly unhappy.

"Hate havin' yuh like this, ob gal," he apologized, rubbing her ears, "but I reckon yuh unnerstan' you n' me's gotta git about toughly worried in these parts. An' donchu go trapzin' 'bout lookin' for me, neither. I'll be back, an' till I am I do want nobody to tin me. That's the sort o' game this is."

He tickled her nose and hurried away. Whiskers watched him go, with the faintest of heartsick whinnies. Then she fell to cropping the grass. It was all in the day's work.

As darkness fell Blue Pete found himself back where Scarway had waylaid him. He had been aware of no urge to the spot, but his feet had carried him there. For the moment Thoreau had faded from his mind.

In the very hollow he had started to skirt when Scarway held him up he lay down and promptly fell asleep.

In the morning, refreshed more than he had been for days, he started away. The package of food he had taken from Suffron's saddle he had used sparingly, and some still remained. He ate sparingly, for he had no idea where the next meal would come from. He descended the slope, following the route he and Scarway had taken. In a vague and unjustified optimism he hoped to be able to follow the cowboy's trail. If only he could find which direction he had taken.

It did not take long to convince him that, beyond the few drops of dried blood, Scarway had left nothing for him to follow. And presently he gave it up. Growing more and more irritated and depressed he wandered vaguely about. His chances of finding the outlaw were small and if he did it would almost certainly be under conditions where Scarway would have the advantage.

Realizing at last the pointlessness and danger of his wanderings, he returned to the little clearing in the valley and crossed it. Scarway might have been as curious as he as to the origin of the bullet that had interrupted the duel, and he might return with a desire for revenge. The bullet had drawn blood, and Scarway was not one to let that go unavenged.

Prowling about, a faint mark in the soft mould of the forest floor drew his attention. A moccasin! Thoreau, of course. Thoreau had been there. Perhaps from that very spot he had fired at Scarway.

At the thought of Frenchy his eyes brightened. But the next moment he remembered that it was Scarway he was after now, and to get Frenchy out of his mind he started back toward the mountains. Scarway was as likely to be in one direction as another.

The distant barking of dogs warned him that an Indian encampment lay somewhere below him, and without anything in mind he worked along until he stood on a height from which the camp was visible. The braves of the camp were collected in a tight group, looking back down the valley. Was someone coming or going? When, after a few minutes, they turned away, he knew that someone must have just left the camp. And so he hurried away to satisfy himself as to whom it was.

Suddenly, some distance before him, a rifle-shot rang out. Instinctively he jerked his rifle forward, ready for action, though he knew by the sound that the shot had not been fired at him. Then through the trees he caught a glimpse of Scarway.

As he started forward, a second shot broke the silence. It came from much nearer where he stood, and as he looked Thorrau dropped out of sight. Then Thorrau must have fired at Scarway, though, since there had not been a hit, the idea was only to frighten the cowboy.

But at whom had Scarway been shooting?

For several minutes the half-breed lay where he was, waiting for something more to happen. It was not safe to expose himself, for both Franchy and Scarway had vanished and he had little idea where they were. After a time, however, impatient, he crept down the slope. Scarway's bullet had gone in that direction.

The sound of running horses hastened his steps. Recklessly he tore through the trees. As he came in sight of the clearing he saw the horses. They were riderless—and one was the Mounted Police horse! A fearful glance along the clearing satisfied him that the Policeman had not been killed. He and Suffron had escaped. With a lighter heart he set out after

the horses. They would run, he knew a few hundred yards, then they would stop to graze. Such horses must be accustomed to shooting.

He found them where he expected to. The Police horse was nearest him, and he walked out toward it. It heard him, raised its head, and recognizing him, whinnied a welcome. He caught it and led it to a tree, where he tied it. The other horse came to him readily and was tied. Then he disappeared into the forest.

He retraced his steps, closely eyeing the ground as he went, trusting to his ears and that sixth sense to warn him of danger. He came on a spot where a horse had been tied to a tree shortly before, and he set out to follow the trail. It led upward and toward the west. Scarway or Frenchy? He did not know and it did not matter. It was something definite to do at last. The futile wandering of the day before had left him with a depressing conviction that he was wasting his time.

The horse had kept steadily westward, ever getting higher, and it had had a rider there. The barking of dogs in the valley below approached and faded out behind him. The camp held no interest for him now. The trail left by the horse became more difficult to follow, and he was forced to concentrate more completely on it. The ground commenced to rise more rapidly. It became more broken, strewn with rocks and amid which grew stunted trees.

Scarway or Frenchy? Again and again he asked himself that, but there was no answer from the trail.

Could it be that it was only some Indian? He decided against that, fighting the thought for whoever it was had avoided the camp in the valley below, riding toward some definite goal.

Crags appeared. They rose on either side at one place, and beyond, the ground was almost too rough

for a horse. An ideal hiding-place. Was that what the rider sought?

He was asking himself that when, not far before him, something moved above a large rock and dropped out of sight. With a distinct shock the half-breed pulled up. For in that movement he had recognized the head of a bronco. It had fallen and was unable to rise.

He hurried forward, recklessly exposing himself. The bronco lay with its head propped against another large rock. One of its forelegs was broken. It turned large, pleading eyes on him and whinnied pitifully.

He went to it. He drew his .45, placed the muzzle against the bronco's head, closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger. The animal dropped back without a struggle.

Blue Pete looked down on it. Yes, but where was its rider? And suddenly he realized the danger he was in. Ducking behind a rock, he peered about him but could see no one. Whoever had ridden the dead bronco was gone. He rose and walked around the rock.

Curled there in a heap lay Frenchy Thereau. His eyes were closed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SERGEANT CROWDS

AT first, as he stared down on the inanimate figure, he was conscious only of a feeling of pity, of distinct shock, then there rose within him a surging indignation that Fate had intervened to rob him of the goal toward which he had laboriously and dangerously directed every energy for weeks.

Thoreau lay on his side one knee almost touching his chin, an arm outstretched under his head. A drying pool of blood had gathered on his sleeve beneath his forehead showing that he had fallen on his left temple. The bronco had evidently stumbled on a loose stone and thrown its rider over the rock.

Indignation grew to an unreasoning rage and continued for several seconds. So often had this same Fate thrown them together when neither could do anything to end their rivalry, and now, when both were free, it had stepped in and fooled them both. For Thoreau must have had a fleeting moment of disappointment, of despair, before Death cut everything short. For the blood that had flowed proved that he had not died instantly.

And then Blue Pete noticed that blood still oozed from the wounded temple, and he stepped over the body and knelt beside it. His hand moved slowly over the dark cheek. It was still warm. He picked up a limp wrist and felt the pulse. It beat.

He rose and stood looking down on the man who was no longer his enemy, wondering what he could

do. Thoreau was still alive and something had to be done about it and done quickly.

He looked about for water, but none was in sight. Then he remembered a flask he had seen fastened to the saddle of the dead bronco and he hastened to fetch it. It was almost full and he drew the cork and prepared to splash it over the unconscious man.

But even as the flask tipped he bethought himself and searched Thoreau for weapons. Two guns he found, one carefully strapped beneath his left arm. His belt and a pocketful of cartridges he took. The rifle lay several yards away where it had probably fallen when Thoreau was thrown. Thus he bore away and hid in a crevice in a pile of rocks.

At the dash of the cool water Thoreau shuddered. His eyes opened. At first they were vacant, but as he moved his body his face twisted with pain, and one hand went down to feel at his left leg.

The pain appeared to rouse him for his eyes took on a look of recognition and he raised himself on an elbow and stared up at Blue Pete. His free hand went to his belt not swiftly or furtively but openly. When he found his guns gone he smiled coldly.

"Can it be Pete," he asked, his lip curling, "that all these years I've mistook you?" Is this the sort of settlement that will satisfy you?

An angry flush suffused the half-breed's face. "Aw, shut yer trap. Yer leg's broke. An' that's a nasty cut yuh got on yer forehead. Yuh ain't worth shootin' like yuh are now. I gotta git yuh fixed up—somehow."

Thoreau dragged himself up till his back rested against a rock. "I've still got my two hands and my eyes are as good as ever. Any distance within range will suit me. If you'll return me one of my guns—I think you know I won't play you the trick that rat did yesterday."

"Aw, shut up."

He stooped and picked Thoreau up as easily as if he were a child, but as gently as a nurse.

"This ain't no place fer yuh like yuh are now, Frenchy. That's shade over thar under that cliff."

He started off with his burden toward the cliff. It rose for perhaps thirty feet, casting a pleasant shadow at its base.

"Yuh'll be aw right thar till I bring Whiskers. I kin git yuh to some camp whar they don' know nothin' bout yuh, or I'll run yuh out to a ranch. Yuh gotta git that leg fixed up mighty smart."

He talked as he went along. A hand slid down his side. It stopped at his belt. He felt it all the way. He felt the gun hanging in his belt withdrawn, but he said nothing, only walked on.

Suddenly Thoreau laughed bitterly. For a moment the cold muzzle of the gun pressed against Blue Pete's cheek, then it was returned to its place in the belt.

"Isn't Fate the damndest sort of a clown, Pete? It plays the most ludicrous tricks. It keeps on playing them on us till I think sometimes we're doomed never to settle our score. We meet—we keep on meeting where one or the other holds all the cards, yet neither will play them. Which of us has the quicker hand, the steadier, the clearer eye? I don't know. Shall we ever know? And we want so much to know. There's a nasty overhanging power called Destiny. I think we're both in its shadow."

Carefully the half-breed lowered him against the wall of the cliff. It was a perfect spot for the purpose. The winds had blown a soft matting of leaves against it, and a tiny stream gurgled past only a few feet away. The curve of the rock would protect Thoreau from the afternoon sun and from the western and northern winds.

For a full minute Thoreau leaned back and closed his eyes. Gentle as Blue Pete had been, the pain must have been excruciating. A pallor was visible even through the Indian stain. He opened his eyes. The half-breed watched him anxiously.

"I must be off co.our, Pete," Thoreau murmured, with a wan smile. "That leg hurts like the devil, and I'm afraid there's something wrong—inside. You know, I haven't a speck of fight left in me. . . I suppose that's because you and I can't hate each other as we should, whatever else we wish. This is as near comfort as I can get. I know, till I find a bed and a doctor. But it must be the Indians I trust now, I daren't go near a ranch."

Blue Pete's face was troubled. "Reckon yuh're right, Frenchy. The Mounties 's here in the foothills. I gotta keep yuh outa thar way."

A strangely soft expression altered Thoreau's face. "Funny how neither you nor I think of thanking each other. I wouldn't insult you by thanking you now. . . But I believe this puts me in your debt—or are we even? I can't seem to remember all the times, they came so frequently."

"Aw, we ain't 'memberin' nothin' but that yuh gotta git that leg looked after," grunted the half-breed. "Now I'm skippin' off fer Whiskers. I cud carry yuh but it 'ud be harder on yuh. Th' ole gal'll be easy ridin'. She knows wot a broke leg means."

He started away.

Thoreau called after him. "Hadn't you better leave me a gun?"

The half-breed stopped and considered. Once he even turned back, but second thoughts intervened. He shook his head.

"No, yuh ain't that bad, Frenchy. We'll git yuh outa this." Then he was gone.

For a time his route lay directly back along the trail Thoreau's bronco had taken, and he followed it almost unconsciously, recalling the landmarks he had passed. As he left it, directing his course toward where he had left the pinto, a pressing sense of discomfort drew him to a stop. He could not understand it. He had done all he could for Thoreau, and all there was left to do now was to hurry and get him to a doctor. Yet something held him where he was.

Suddenly the blood tingled under his scalp. The familiar warning he never ignored sent him crouching behind a tree. He knew he was not alone, yet he could see or hear nothing.

He was still within sight of the trail left by the bronco, and his eyes were drawn toward it. A flash of navy blue, cut by a yellow band, caught his eye. A Mounted Policeman! Then it was gone.

But the story it told was complete: the Mounted Policeman was on Thoreau's trail as he himself had been. Only a few minutes on such a plain trail and he would surely stumble on the dead bronco. And from there—Frenchy!

Frenchy would be helpless to defend himself. He had no gun, and he could not move. . . . But did he wish him to defend himself, in the one way he knew, against a Mounted Policeman? On the other hand, could he stand by and see Frenchy captured?

Without waiting for more he crept away. He sped around—turned back—retraced his steps toward where he had left the injured man.

He was too late. The wide circle he had had to follow was longer, and the ground was rougher, so that just as he came within sight of the dead bronco a peaked Stetson, bent over the trail, emerged from the trees.

The half-breed dropped out of sight behind the rocks and on hands and knees crept back into the forest. Too late now to carry through his plan. Thoreau must take his chances. Not far before where he had taken cover the cliff that sheltered Frenchy fell away steeply. He crawled to it and started desperately to climb.

He had no definite plan, but from that elevation he might at least overlook what was about to happen, and he might be able to prevent a tragedy. If only it were someone else than a Mountie! He would know what to do then.

He reached the top of the cliff well back from the edge, where he could not be seen. Cautiously he crawled forward. The top of the cliff was strewn with rocks among which grew stunted bushes. It furnished perfect concealment.

On reaching the edge he raised his head. The Mounted Policeman had found the dead bronco. He stood over it, frowning down on it.

It was Sergeant Mahon!

CHAPTER XXXIX

ONE BULLET

FOR a moment Blue Pete felt dizzy. It could not be the Sergeant. He would not believe it. He had seen the horse, he knew to whom it belonged. He closed his eyes, and his fingers gripped at the sharp stones about him until they bled. He opened his eyes.

The Sergeant was still there. He would come on. That would be the end.

He remembered that he had charmed Frenchy, and a sigh of relief broke from him. Thoreau armed would have given the Sergeant no chance. He would have shot to kill. He would have had to, all his suffering, all his privations, all his lonesomeness and restraint packed behind the bullet. Now at least that could not happen.

But what about Frenchy? Captured at last, in the hands of the law that would remember nothing but that he had been a rustler. Jail! The ignominy of it, the mental torture. Frenchy would not live through it. Fitting end perhaps to a confirmed law breaker, but a dismal shuddering end to a big though twisted soul.

Sergeant Mahon stood over the dead bronco. He stooped to examine the bullet hole in its head. Perhaps—perhaps he would read something there that would turn him away. That the rider of the injured horse had gone on. No use to follow a man's trail over such rough ground.

Blue Pete slid forward through the bushes until he could see over the edge of the cliff. Thoreau still sat

where he had been left his back against the rock. His eyes were closed. One hand was pressed against his side and a spasm of pain crossed his stained face.

The Sergeant commenced to wander about the bronco, his eyes fixed on the ground. He saw the blood.

Instantly his manner changed. He became more alert, almost excited. He crouched peering cautiously about. He took a step toward the cliff, where the trail of blood led. His foot touched a stone.

Thoreau must have heard it for his eyes opened and he straightened his head bent forward, listening. The Sergeant was still concealed from him.

Blue Pete grew back. He slid his .45 from the holster and emptied the cylinder—all but one cartridge. He crept forward again and hung over the edge.

Sergeant Mahon must have come within the range of Thoreau's eyes, for they took on a well frightened look. A swift glance he threw about him, as if with some desperate hope that he might conceal himself. Then he smiled and settled back his fists gripped in his lap.

Blue Pete reached over. He dropped the gun in a bed of leaves close to Thoreau's side. The latter's eyes jerked upward as he clutched at the weapon. He saw the half breed, and a puzzled look crossed his face. Then he looked at the gun. He saw the single cartridge. With a smile he drew a knife and quickly cut a nick beside the others that marked the grip. With another look upward he nodded. His back straightened, the barrel rose and held against his temple. His lips formed

"Always in your debt," they said. His finger closed on the trigger.

At the sound of the shot Sergeant Mahon dropped out of sight. Blue Pete slid back and dashed down the

sloping side of the cliff. He ran around its face. But the Sergeant was before him. He stood beside the dead body of the man the Mounted Police had sought for weeks. He held in his hand the .45.

Without a word, not even looking at Blue Pete, he handed it back, but his head shook hopelessly. And the half breed snuffled and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"It saved a lot o' trouble to the Mounties," he muttered.

"And to Eugene Thoreau," said Mahon gently.

Inspector Barker listened to Sergeant Mahon's story without comment to the end. Just inside the door of his office Blue Pete stood with his back to the wall, fumbling at his sombrero. In the story the Inspector heard was no mention of the gun that had fired that last well-aimed shot. A smile tugged at the half-breed's lips.

"Th' ole .45 got him at last," he thought. "Reckon we both won, Frenchy 'n' me."

The Inspector said, "Well, it didn't turn out as any of us expected, Pete, including yourself."

Blue Pete said nothing, he only continued to smile.

"But you'd have had him if the Sergeant hadn't beaten you to it, so you masn't feel badly about it." His face clouded and he rested his chin on his hand. "Everything's twisted. For the first time nothing has happened to complicate the affair. I don't have to cook up a single yarn to get you and me, Pete, out of a hole. I congratulate us."

"And now you can go out to the 3-Bar-Y to that anxious woman of yours or she'll be hounding us again into action to find out what's happened to you. It looks, too, as if you're in for a rest, there isn't a single major

crime on the calendar—and that's the only kind you like. Give my best to Mira."

Blue Pete's face twisted to a smile that had something cunning in it, and he opened the door to go. In the doorway he turned.

"Heerd an thim' 'bout that skunk Bill Scarway lately, Inspector?"

"Scarway? Scarway? Who's he? Oh, you mean that Wyoming gunman who got away from the Macleod boys on his way to jail. Why, no, I haven't paid much attention to it. He isn't likely to drift this way. He's probably skipped back across the border."

"It was Blue Pete caught him for Constable Phillips," Mahon explained.

Inspector Barker's eyes flashed approval. "I didn't hear of that. I must get the story when I've got time. Too bad he didn't get him after he escaped."

"I seen him," said Blue Pete.

The Inspector had turned away. Now he whirled on him. "You did? What did you do about it?"

"Nothin'."

"'Nothing'? Did you know he'd escaped?"

"Shure. He told me."

The Inspector threw up his hands. "And you didn't get him for us!"

"It wass none o' my business. I was after Frenchy."

Inspector Barker glared, he swore. Blue Pete stepped into the hall and softly closed the door behind him.

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